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“If you’re going to try, go all the way. Otherwise, don’t even start. This could mean losing girlfriends, wives, relatives and maybe even your mind. It could mean not eating for three or four days. It could mean freezing on a park bench. It could mean jail. It could mean derision. It could mean mockery, isolation. Isolation is the gift. All the others are a test of your endurance, of how much you really want to do it. And, you’ll do it, despite rejection and the worst odds. And it will be better than anything else you can imagine. If you’re going to try, go all the way. There is no other feeling like that. You will be alone with the gods, and the nights will flame with fire. You will ride life straight to perfect laughter. It’s the only good fight there is.”

Charles Bukowski

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Preface

“He not busy being born is busy dying.”

Bob Dylan

Self, Brain and Society provides an interdisciplinary account of structures underlying the sense of self – that illusive feeling of being one and the same person over a longer period of time – with a focus on social processes, by combining theoretical developments and empirical findings that span from neuroscience to philosophy and social theory, with occasional ventures through mysticism.

First, I introduce the concept along with a brief overview of historical development thereof. Next, I demonstrate the problem of the self as it manifests itself in legal affairs, following by contrasting two opposing paradigms, namely, humanism and anti-humanism, when approaching the nature of the self.

I then turn to the prevalent conceptualisations of the self and social structures, several of which I consequently combine in providing my account of synthesis of the self, while drawing an ontological picture in which such framework is feasible. That is, I argue that brain processes generate conditions, by means of negation, for the emergence of the primordial self – an experiential standpoint, whereas the social dimension, while irreducible to the brain, introduces the capacity for meaning and reflective self-consciousness, that is, the narrative self.

PREFACE

Additionally, I centre the discussion on the abyss between phenomena and meaning, while also providing an account of their interaction. Namely, I suggest that emotions secure the stability of symbolic structures, which determine how we grasp reality and our selves. Finally, I conclude the discussion by pondering over freedom of will.

In conclusion I explicate how the sense of self is produced, by pointing out how the primordial self and the social symbolic structure – that which brings the narrative self into being – reflexively interact. Or, in other words, I render discernible how one objectifies oneself in a symbol, but in order to be able to do so, one must first exist in a society one co-creates.

Chapter 1

Introduction

“He allowed himself to be swayed by his conviction that human beings are not born once and for all on the day their mothers give birth to them, but that life obliges them over and over again to give birth to themselves.”

(Gabriel García Márquez)

1.1 The vanishing spectre

Most of us will probably go through our lives without ever stopping to wonder whether we really are who we think we are, to dwell upon the nature of our selves. Our identities will, for most of the time, tacitly appear to us as impenetrable substances and will never give us any reason to doubt them. Indeed, why should we be suspicious of our innermost beings?

But then comes a moment, an event of a purely trivial nature, say, an encounter with remnants of the past long gone invested with the expression of one's biography, like a diary, a photo album or scribbled thoughts on a forgotten piece of paper. The clash with one's historical self is often more than enough to ignite the curiosity and critically propel it inwards. One recognises one's thoughts in the diary, yet it feels as if another person wrote them down. Indeed, there seems to be some kind of familiar strangeness to them. It is as if one's past self had its own being that was not bound to the present.

Such confrontation is in many instances marked by a minimal traumatic sensation while observing this strange otherness occupying one's own image. What is meant here is the traumatic experience in a purely psychoanalytic sense (Lacan, 1988). In other words, it does not refer to a distressing emotional experience per se, but to the disruption of the continuous horizon of meaning.¹ From the phenomenological perspective, it is a temporary rupture of the meaningful lifeworld caused by an interference of some object that cannot be (immediately) symbolised. To put it differently, it simply does not fit the picture. For a moment, either the meaningful unity of one's experience shatters to chaotic pieces, either one is left standing in front of the opaque wall of self-awareness. *"That is not me!"* one often cries out in a half serious, half humorous manner. However, as we shall see in what has to come, in some profound sense, one is fully justified in saying so.

But what exactly are we talking about here? What do we mean when we invoke the notion of the self? For the purpose of introduction Kircher & David summarise the intuition in a rather clear manner:

"What we mean by self here is as a first approximation the commonly shared experience, that we know we are the same person across time, that we are the author of our thoughts/actions, and that we are distinct from the environment. It is the immediate, pervasive, automatic feeling of being a whole person, different from others, constant over time, with a physical boundary, the centre of all our experience. These feelings are so fundamental to our human experience that we hardly ever think about them."

(Kircher & David, 2003, p. 2)

¹ Nonetheless, even in this sense traumatic experiences are often accompanied by extreme emotional episodes.

Thus, I believe one can risk a speculation that the self is, above all, an experiential reference point, however obscure it may be. There is some ceaseless sameness that permeates our experiences and to which our thoughts, ideas and perceptions refer. But do we not have something more concrete in our minds when we talk about our selves? Is there not much more to identity than merely some deep kernel of conscious experience?

Indeed, our intuitions would, more often than not, tempt us to reply in a positive tone. That feeling of being a whole, enclosed person seems to be comprised of a cohesive set of memories, thoughts and experiences. Furthermore, the experiential standpoint, the perspective that is always already there, gives the impression of being filled with coherence, which then serves as a basis for the entity that we come to take as our identity, the “I” from which I speak.

On the contrary, the sceptic would have us ask whether there really is such a thing as a locus of one’s thoughts and actions or is it merely a grammatical construction that we, users of language, are obliged to rent and carry as the burden of selfhood throughout our lives? Doubtless, these will be the kind of questions that we will attempt to tackle here.

What, then, does it mean to be oneself, as is so often demanded of us today? Granted, to be oneself one must first know oneself. However, at a first glance, it seems that one’s identity, one’s firm sense of self exists only insofar as one does not approach it too directly. That is to say, the experience of stable identity seems to be somehow restricted to the lack of focal awareness of the identity itself. Or, from a different perspective, it appears that the coherent self exists only insofar as one blindly places one’s trust in its existence, that is, as long as one’s fidelity to one’s sense of self remains unquestioned. Accordingly, is then the social injunction to be oneself not obscene, as it demands of us something we are guaranteed to fail at?

Indeed, as you have probably already noticed, in these questions there appears to be a paradox at work. How can *one* be loyal to one's own self? Does the question not suggest that there is already a unity at work in the *one* questioning one's self? Is not the "I" scrutinising one's own self precisely that self? Thus, even if one adopts the constructivist perspective, namely, that one's sense of self, one's identity is an illusion concealing its own origin (Butler, 1988), it nonetheless appears that some kind of experiential reference point, perhaps a unity remains behind the masks of appearances, which perceives this illusion.

The question invokes Butler's work on the paradox of bodily inscriptions (Butler, 1989), where she examines Foucault's conception of the historical signification of the body, that is, the act of a social construction of (the meaning of) the body. Butler takes note of how, when speaking of symbolic inscriptions, a certain notion of pre-given bodily materiality or surface is presupposed, where imprinting takes place, thereby generating the gendered body. On the contrary, Butler holds, the implied surface itself is a structural effect of the social field. Thus, effectively, there is no surface prior to social signification, but the very act of social construction creates the bodily canvas where gendering comes into being.

Could not the same be said of the "I" posing the question? In other words, what if the "I" who questions its own identity is itself a discursive fiction? That is, what if, in some perverse sense, there is no "I" before the question is asked, but the question itself creates the "I ex nihilo, after the fact?

Along the same lines, there appears to be a confusion of identities at work when one considers the act of willing. Namely, if one wills a certain action, if one opts for moving one's arm, who is then the one that obeys this command? A passage from Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* renders the opposition of two parties in the act of willing discernible:

“But now let us notice what is the strangest thing about the will,—this affair so extremely complex, for which the people have only one name. Inasmuch as in the given circumstances we are at the same time the commanding AND the obeying parties, and as the obeying party we know the sensations of constraint, impulsion, pressure, resistance, and motion, which usually commence immediately after the act of will; inasmuch as, on the other hand, we are accustomed to disregard this duality, and to deceive ourselves about it by means of the synthetic term ‘I’: a whole series of erroneous conclusions, and consequently of false judgments about the will itself, has become attached to the act of willing—to such a degree that he who wills believes firmly that willing SUFFICES for action.”

(Nietzsche, 1992, p. 216)

Although Nietzsche here concerns himself with the freedom of will, he nevertheless problematizes the notion of *the synthetic term “I”*, as he puts it, as well. It becomes clear that whoever, or whatever for that matter, identifies with this act of willing, as a matter of rule assumes the side of the commanding party. What are we then to make of the obeying party? Could it just be a misunderstanding, a paradox arising as a necessity by the use of language? Or, perhaps, is it that deep down our selves are actually always split, yet it is in our nature to always empathise with the party that is blessed with freedom?

In a way, one could think of the self as a violent gesture that subjugates the chaotic multiplicity of identities under the guise of unity, thus bringing about an apparent peace of mind. According to this analogy, the self is a merciless conqueror that unites the conflicting savage tribes under the semblance of a coherent and tranquil state.

Regardless of what position one might assume in respect to the postulated questions, let us not take sides just yet and explore what other perils dwell at the problem of the self. Furthermore, let us take no heed of whatever definitions of the self have hitherto been implied. Alas, one thing is certain in what follows - language will not be our ally, but a foe!

1.2 The self and history

The question of selfhood is one that can be traced back to the very origins of philosophy and the problem of self-knowledge, as already problematized by the Ancient Greeks (Berries & Markova, 2003). Hence, it is possible to develop a glimpse of historical variation of the self as a social construct.

As Foucault (2012) notes, the Ancient Greeks saw the concern for oneself as central to taking care of oneself. In a way, the care for oneself was posited as an imperative, since knowing oneself qua being concerned with oneself was considered to be the highest virtue, therefore prioritised in respect to other activities.

As the anecdote goes, when asked why they do not cultivate their own land, the citizens of Sparta replied that they rather take care of themselves. Granted, the obvious interpretation here suggests that what the citizens really meant was taking physical care of their bodies for military and ruling purposes. However, Foucault's reading of their reply, via Socratic dialogues, reverts physical care into a spiritual one:

“Socrates shows the ambitious young man that it is quite presumptuous of him to want to take charge of the city, manage its affairs, and enter into competition with the kings of Sparta or the rulers of Persia, if he has not first learned that which it is necessary to know in order to govern: he must first attend to

himself-and right away, while he is young, for at the age of fifty, it would be too late.”

(Foucault, 2012, p. 44)

The passage indicates that, for Ancient Greeks, the road to governing, the path to knowledge, led through oneself. That is, the self was nothing but the soul – the source of knowledge. Furthermore, it was never too early, or too late for that matter, to contemplate one’s soul. Scrutinising one’s soul meant nothing else but the movement towards light, the never-ending activity of contemplating the reality itself.

Conversely, the shift to Christianity brought about a radical change of morals, which was in turn reflected in a change of conception of the self (Macmillan, 2011). Whereas in Antiquity the self was something one was supposed to invest in, develop and cultivate, the Christian experience was, on the other hand, strikingly organised around the renunciation of the self, as the negation of one’s self was posited as a necessity for salvation of the soul in the afterlife.

The contrast between both conceptions is rendered palpable if one opposes the Antique self, as an aesthetic activity organised around freedom and autonomy, with the Christian self, as an ascetic activity of renunciation organised in opposition to the external and impersonal law. To put it differently, the Christian experience professed rejection of the self, thus in return making the subject an empty surface, which was to be invested with external law. That is, the Christian technology of the self established a subject with a capacity to internalise Christian morals, hence providing a basis for a passive flock governed by a pastoral power.

By the same token, Baumeister (1987) provides a historical review pertaining to selfhood spanning from 11th to 20th century (Table 1). Historical data and literature suggest that the confidence for grasping oneself

seriously deteriorated throughout the last millennium. Thus, the problem of identity is a relatively modern phenomenon. As Baumeister puts it:

“The medieval lords and serfs did not struggle with self-definition the way modern persons do.”

(Baumeister, 1987, p. 2)

Historical era	Self-knowledge, self-conception
Late medieval	Unproblematic Increased sense of unity of single life
Early modern (16 th to 18 th century)	Unproblematic for own self; for others, question of inner true self vs. outer apparent self Increased interest in individuality, uniqueness of self
Puritan	Self-consciousness Concern with self-deception (henceforth, self-knowledge uncertain)
Romantic (late 18 th , early 19 th centuries)	Need to discover own destiny and fulfil it (duty) Imperial, <i>hypertrophied</i> self
Victorian (mid & late 19 th century)	Repression, hypocrisy Involuntary self-disclosure Imperial, <i>hypertrophied</i> self
Early 20 th century	Devaluation of self Impossibility of complete self-knowledge (Freud)
Recent 20 th century	Belief in personal uniqueness Values of self-exploration

Table 1: Issues of selfhood and historical stages (Baumeister, 1987, p. 164).

On the contrary, the literature of late medieval era indicates that self-knowledge was not of utter importance. There is little evidence of introspection and there seems to be a significant lack of autobiographies. Only towards the end of the medieval period did the sense of individuality

evolve, very likely due to popular Christian beliefs in respect to individual souls. Next, the early modern era brought about the distinction between the true inner self and a deceptive public appearance. Consequently, society in general was obsessed with deception, which was reflected in art, philosophy and politics.² In effect, sincerity became one of the highest virtues. Further, Puritanism, with the doctrine of predestination – afterlife already being fixed once one was born – manifested high levels of self-scrutiny, as people could not help themselves but investigate whether they were among the Chosen Ones. However, self-reflection gave rise to the notion of self-deception, thus knowledge of the self became uncertain. In turn, the Romantic era emphasized the scope of the self, of the wealth of inner life. Personality was deemed the central aspect of the self and the uniqueness of individual destiny required of one to fulfil it. The Victorian era was thus marked by a combination of frequent self-scrutiny and high moral standards, which forced Victorians into self-deception. Hence, people were often stressed about the possibility of involuntary expression of their inner selves (Baumeister, 1987).

Therefore, by the time the 20th century finally arrived, the notion of uncertainty apropos to self-knowledge was firmly grounded. The popularity of Freudian psychoanalysis only added to the decentralised and unconscious conception of the self. The trend of contingency continued throughout the (late) 20th century and as a result the beginning of disintegration of the grand narratives (Lyotard, 1984) deprived postmodern subjects of meta-structures in which one could place one's self and establish a sense of the inner and outer world by a reference to a stable symbolic structure. Accordingly, one's self was torn apart among the plurality of truths, discourses and functional (societal) roles.

² Think of works by William Shakespeare and Nichollò Machiavelli.

Finally, the 21th century might best be described as a period of the commodified self (Murphy, 2000). That is, the diffusive consumer ideology has radically redesigned the way we think of our selves. The self became something one must invest in so it can sell on the market of appearances. The commodities one buys first and foremost signal the wealth of inner personality. The logic is best rendered by Apple's famous logo "*Be creative!*" Meaning, one is not meant to purchase their product because of its functionality (in the first place), but because it signifies the creative capacity of anyone who yields it.

Thus a brief look at historical data clearly demonstrates that the experience of selfhood is not a neutral category resistant to temporality of life, but is in a close connection with ever-changing social structures. Moreover, as I will demonstrate in the next section, the problematic of the self is often a target of conflicting interests such as those of politics and juridical systems.

Chapter 2

The self and freedom of will

“A man can do what he wants, but not want what he wants.”

Arthur Schopenhauer

2.1 Legal disputes over human nature

The nature of the self and free will is a subject matter of many discourses, perhaps the most controversial of them being the juridical one in respect to moral responsibility, therefore it comes by no surprise that variations in theorising thereof lurk around every corner.

Call to mind the famous case of *Leopold and Loeb*, where two wealthy law students from Chicago, both with a burning itch for committing a perfect crime, kidnapped and murdered 14-year old Robert Frank (Larson, 2008). The case attained its national notoriety owing to the fact that, for the first time in legal history, the basis for criminal defence was built upon a notion of a deterministic universe.

The speech of Clarence Darrow, the attorney, lasted for more than twelve hours and left the jury, along with the judge, in awe. Darrow's arguments were consistently fuelled by references to causal processes that make up a man:

“They killed him because they were made that way. Because somewhere in the infinite process that go to the making up of the boy or the man something slipped, and those unfortunate lads sit here hated, despised, outcasts, with the community shouting for their blood.”

(Larson, 2008, p. 143)

In the end, the defence achieved its goal as the boys were sentenced to a life in jail, instead of receiving a death penalty. However, the public perception of the case was far from coherent and unanimous, given the reports of hundreds of men and women rioting outside the courthouse.

There is yet another far more recent illustrative case that might be of value here. It demonstrates the tension between the freedom of will and causality when it comes to the making of the public sphere in which we participate. Recall the Norwegian nightmare Anders Behring Breivik, who, on the 22nd July 2011, murdered 77 people in a mass shooting on the island Utøya and in bombing of government buildings in Oslo. After being apprehended and put to trial, the case was based on the opposition between sanity and psychiatric illness. The defence pleaded for Breivik’s sanity, whereas the prosecutors argued that Breivik was a madman (de Graff, van der Heide, Wanmakers, & Weggemans, 2013).

However, in respect to what made Breivik who he was and what he did - was it his free rational choice or were there hidden deterministic forces of nature at work? - the stakes here were not whether he ought to receive a shorter versus longer sentence in prison, but instead how that monstrous event will inscribe itself in the symbolic universe of meaning.³

³ In contrast to the case of Leopold and Loeb, it was the prosecutors here who argued for the deterministic causes of his actions, not the defence.

Breivik, a self-proclaimed purveyor of far-right militant ideology, stood against the accusations of being schizophrenic-delusional, of experiencing a psychotic episode whilst slaughtering innocent people, for he wanted the attack to signal a precise ideological and islamophobic meaning and not, as the defence would have it, to be reduced to a massacre brought about by a maniac, whose words can be nothing but ramblings of a madman. In short, Breivik wanted to send a public message to the world as a free man, a magnum opus of his free rational choice and careful deliberation, whereas the defence, on the other hand, aimed at crushing these ideas and the terroristic attack itself by reducing them to malfunctions in the wiring of Breivik's brain, thus rendering them meaningless and, in effect, preventing them to gain their own momentum and significance in European society already troubled by the raising spirit of far-right ideologies (Bartlett, Birdwell, & Littler, 2012).⁴

The legal cases hint that the way we construe of the self, identity, agency or of the locus of men's actions can have serious ramifications on a whole other level. Further, they demonstrate that every bringing of the notion of the self into play, or every investigation thereof, will necessarily be accompanied by a certain theoretical background, which itself will determine, or influence on a large scale, the very nature of the notion of the self. In particular, this means that one will be, more often than not, confronted with the question of causality as being inherent to the human nature.

⁴ The final verdict proclaimed Breivik as sane and legally responsible for killing 77 people.

2.2 Between nothingness and structure

At a first glance, one is tempted to assert that the contradiction between the implicit, unconscious, deterministic social structures and free authenticity, as being central to the notion of the self, culminated in tension between humanism and anti-humanism. Within this binary opposition, let us have a look at the theoretical contrast between existentialism and structuralism.⁵

Sartre (2003), one of the key figures of existential thought, postulates that human beings are at their zero-level free. He argues for a difference between authentic existence as opposed to a projected identity. For example, when I consider myself being a student, a son, a cognitive scientist, etc., I am doing something what Sartre calls *bad faith*. In other words, a projected identity is self-deceptive. It is deceptive in a sense that my behaviour and, decisively, my thoughts are governed by my belief that *facticity* - the contingent and historically conditioned position one finds oneself in - makes me who I am, a belief in a prescribed social role being an essential and constitutive part of myself.

To be sure, one's belief in a social role one ought to perform is instituted under certain levels of social coercion. Ever since one's birth, one is told what one is, one's behaviour is at once controlled, corrected and normalised. Recall Althusser's observation that places for our identities are carved in the social fabric far in advance, already long before we are born (Althusser, 1971). Think of all the rituals and all the wealth of expectations involved already prior to a child's birth. The colour of the room signalling

⁵ Note, however, that both terms designating respective philosophical movements would best be described as umbrella terms. That is, both are theoretical paradigms that encompass several different theories that are not necessarily conflicting with the ones from the other perspective. Nonetheless, the exemplars of both sides do form a contrast when opposing the subject with a structure.

the gender, automobiles for a boy, dolls for a girl. Destiny already knocks on the door while one's existence is purely of a virtual nature residing only in the minds of others.

However, some additional clarification of social coercion is needed here. When we speak of prescribed social roles one ought not to take the notion of prescription too literally. It is not meant here that when a child is growing up she is explicitly told to behave like a high born lady, to aspire to be a violinist or a ballerina, etc., because that is what is right and virtuous, whereas everything else is wrong and evil.⁶ What is aimed at, though, is the internalisation of values, the values expressed by her (proximal) surroundings – family, friends, peers, media, etc.

What do we mean by internalisation of values? Think of all the situations where we observe other people praising, judging, evaluating or damning the behaviour of others. Every speech act or, even more, every gesture someone makes has the potential of being invested with some moral valence. Human behaviour is marked by emotional expressions, thus it is not hard to imagine how all the implicit and even unintentional gestures have the capacity for signalling some kind of valuations.⁷ Even though if one is not aware of them, the totality of gestures and statements nevertheless has the potential to shape the subconscious of the observer, thereby his own valuation of the environment.

Hence, social coercion, in a sense of internalised system of valuations, is a much more powerful idea. If the child internalises her interpretation of

⁶ Such cases nonetheless do exist, but they do not represent the majority of forces involved in the social construction of identity or so it seems. These are, in a way, the surface examples, the tips of the icebergs.

⁷ Consider that even the so-called neutral, emotionally empty gestures can signal the lack of interest, in effect the lack of value in their object, thus locating the object of valuation on the negative side of the moral spectrum.

the societal valuation of the concept of *the woman*, she will take it as her own. Namely, if we postulate that she, in her subconscious systems of values, installs the representation of the right way of being or presenting herself as a woman, she will in the case of failing to meet that standard most likely experience negative emotions. Is this not the case when one feels guilty for not being the person one *feels* oneself is? Does not the expression “*I have failed you as a...*” demonstrate this inner logic of valuations, namely, that one inherently aspires to be something precisely as long as one aspires to be that something for the voyeuristic gaze of society? To cut the long story short, one desires to be something only insofar as that desire was installed by the perception of the valuations expressed by someone else. In this sense, social coercion can function entirely on a subliminal level.

Furthermore, if one couples the subliminal operations of social coercion with the explicit reactions of others to the expressions of one’s behaviour, the normalisation and control of the social role one is performing becomes even more strict and limited. Indeed, fear of condemnation and social rejection or, in the extreme case, physical violence can be a strong motivator.

Bring to mind Theon Greyjoy, one of the many focal characters in George R.R. Martin’s series of epic novels *The Song of Ice and Fire*, who, while living his whole life as a hostage of the Stark family, upon finally returning home finds himself torn apart (Martin, 2011).⁸ While carrying honest feelings of loyalty for the Starks, his own father and the Greyjoy family explicitly denied him the symbolic status as a true Greyjoy, thereby resulting in an emotionally painful conversion of his social identity, ending with Theon marching against the Stark family. The illustrative point is that the entire conversion is marked by a painful inner tension between his loyalty to the Starks and a desire to belong to his own family. In the end, a

⁸ Theon being a hostage was a mean of the Stark family to end the rebellion of the Greyjoys. Although a hostage, the Starks treated him as one of their own.

constant and explicit negative pressure of his surroundings effectively changes his social identity.

To return back to Sartre, even so, even in spite of facticity, internalisation of values and social coercion he argues that a man is condemned to be free. The deep kernel of the self is nothingness, pure empty consciousness. In fact, the key characteristic of consciousness is the internal negation of things-in-themselves. That is to say, it is the negation of facticity that opens up the space for free choice.

The message of the existential formula *existence precedes essence* is thus rendered meaningful in a passage from Sartre's lecture *Existentialism Is a Humanism*:

“What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself.”

(Sartre, 2007, p. 22)

In short, a man first exists and, as such, he exists as a paradoxical nothing, as something that he is not. Only afterwards does the essence appear, after an act, after a choice. In this sense, one's self is nothing but one's present decision-making activity. To sum up, it is in our power to break out of what we were contingently made to be and realise our authentic self.⁹ First and foremost, this entails the recognition of one's current self being a projected identity that is nothing more than fiction.

⁹ The basis for realising an authentic self is the recognition of the absurdity of life, of the meaningless reality and at the same time affirming oneself as the creator of meaning, that is, a meaning that has no justifiable ground. A meaning that seeks no ground.

On the contrary, the structuralist would deny the primacy of the free self by referring to the way in which one perceives the world is already structured in advance. Thus, the thoughts, the ideas, the whole decision-making process is in some sense destined to resolve itself in a particular way, relying on a particular structure. That is, the language which one uses to articulate a problem is not one's own. In effect, it is not possible to conceive of real freedom as one cannot think of the unthinkable, of the radical freedom, which is precisely something that lies outside of the deterministic structure.

To start at the beginning, structuralism found its ground in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, who rejected the common notion of language as being composed out of separate identifiable units existing in a diachronic horizon (Hawkes, 2003). Quite the reverse, Saussure argues that language is primarily synchronic, that is, a structure, a totalised whole that ought to be studied in its immediacy as it appears.

For Saussure, the units of language have no substantial existence of their own. Rather, they exist as a part of a greater structure and their identity comes into being through their relation with other elements. It is the difference that counts. An element's meaning is derived from the differential reference to that which it is not, namely, other elements. When one speaks, the words that are spoken are always accompanied by some absence, by the background made out of other unspoken words – the totality without which the enunciated content would be meaningless.

Thus, what we usually refer to as speech is for Saussure *parole*, that is, a concrete materialisation of a larger abstract structure of language designated as *langue*. In effect, speech is only but a tip of the iceberg. Yet it is only in speech that the eternal structure of language erupts as the background of speech, investing it with meaning.

What is more, Piaget (1971) argues that language is, above all, a transformable and self-regulating structure. The structure ought not to be comprehended static, but rather something that evolves and changes over time. Crucially, it is the self-regulating aspect that matters the most. Namely, language is, for Piaget, a closed system. It is a structure that makes no appeal beyond itself. It does not care about reality. The way certain signifiers (sound-images) represent the signified (content, meaning) is rather completely arbitrary. There is no internal rule as to why the word *tree* ought to represent the object we refer to as a tree. It follows that what makes a difference in a given structure cannot be reduced to some natural fact. Language simply does not care.

As a consequence, structuralism became a way of thinking about the perception of world. Specifically, the problematisation of perception regarded the relation between the observer and the world (Hawkes, 2003). It was in this relation that the stuff of reality was to be found. To put it bluntly, the nature of a perceived object does not reside in the object itself, but rather in its relation to other objects. Furthermore, the relations between objects are the structure itself, which is enacted in every act of perceiving, like *langue* comes into being with every *parole*. In other words, the observer first structures the reality and only then perceives it as meaningful.

It does not take one long to imagine that these perceptual configurations might be a part of a greater and shared social structure, hence one can expect different perceptual configurations among variety of cultures. For instance, Nisbet & Miyamoto (2005) report that Westerners tend to analyse objects independently of their context, whereas Asians are prone to take the context in consideration in a more holistic manner. Furthermore, Nisbet & Miyamoto argue that participation in a particular social practice can have chronic effect on the reshaping of perceptual processes.

To conclude, by borrowing from structural linguistics Claude Lévi-Strauss established structural anthropology, where he observed how humans organize their social life according to some implicit binary oppositions, such as kinship systems, cooking, political ideology, etc. (Lévi-Strauss, 1966, 2008). Consequently, human behaviour was reducible to self-regulated linguistic-like structures.

This brings us to the notion of the structuralist's self. That is, it is not the man who thinks in structures, rather it is the structures that think through him (Hawkes, 2003). Thus, what appears as a meaningful world where I can freely discharge my rationality is merely a manifestation of an underlying social structure. In some sense, I act on knowledge I am not aware of, yet it is essential to my sense of self, to my sense of being in the world. In effect, the structuralist's self lacks freedom.

Now that we have gained some basic insight into the subject matter, we can proceed to the review of the prevalent conceptualizations of the self.

Chapter 3

Concepts of the self

“Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same. More than one person, doubtless like me, writes in order to have no face.”

Michel Foucault

3.1 The rational self

Modern philosophy began with René Descartes and it is also with Descartes that we begin our investigation of the notion of the self. In *Meditations*, Descartes (2007) outlines what we might term the **rational self**. By examining how the form, colour, size and smell of a block of wax changes, yet the essence of it remains the same when brought to the proximity of fire, Descartes argues that ultimately no knowledge can be attained through sense perception with absolute certainty. In short, senses can be deceitful.

However, amidst all the unreliability and doubting a single certainty arises – there is, positively, always something that doubts its senses. The realisation is beyond dispute. The doubting, the thinking, that immaterial substance that can be explored without the use of deceitful senses is then the essential guarantor of existence; the very proof that I, the thinking self, do exist. That is to say, Descartes associates the experiencing subject with a

thinking thing, in effect establishing the foundations of identity in the thought itself:

“I am therefore, precisely speaking, only a thinking thing, that is, a mind (messive animus), understanding, or reason, terms whose signification was before unknown to me. I am, however, a real thing, and really existent – but what thing? The answer was, a thinking thing.

(Descartes, 2007, p. 34)

Thus, the Cartesian self is a rational self insofar as we conceptualise the self as a logical thinking being. In this sense, thought exists as its own self-sufficient substance that is not localised like a body is extended in space. It is independent of the external reality, but external reality does manifest itself in it. Moreover, it is transparent and omnipresent in relation thereof. As thought is readily known and directly accessible, one can attain further knowledge that is more reliable than the one attained through senses. That is to say, we have explicit access to an innate system of ideas (Azeri, 2011). In short, the rational self as deployed by Descartes is nothing but the innate logic, a system of rational thought as it manifests itself in different modes – affirming, judging, doubting, etc.

3.2 The empirical self

In response to continental rationalism, British empiricists argue that knowledge cannot exist as an a priori logical structure; rather, it is through experience and sense perception that one acquires it. Accordingly, the notion of the self changes. Locke (1836) insists that there are no innate mental structures. Reflective capacity can only be formed through experience. This leads Locke to identify the self in consciousness itself. We exist only as far as our consciousness extends. In this extensional sense,

conscious experience is intimately linked to memory. This brings us to the **memory theory of personal identity**:

“... and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards, to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person; it is the same self now, it was then; and it is by the same self with this present one, that now reflects on it, that that action was done.”

(Locke, 1836, p. 226)

For Locke, the self can be found in the activity of self-identification with a content of conscious experience. The content itself, however, is a collection of sensory experience and reflective capacities, where the logic of thought is shaped throughout a lifetime. We have an identity only insofar as we are conscious – the self is to be located in the continuous repeating of the act of being conscious. Is then identity a discontinuous property that attains unique existence of its own in every act of consciousness? Are we just a series of identities existing in temporal succession of sporadic moments? Granted, for Locke, the very link between distinct acts of consciousness is memory. When Locke holds that consciousness extends backwards, he is positing that in every act of consciousness we bring into being also the totality of our past experience. In short, memory is a necessary and sufficient condition for the persistence of identity through time.

Admittedly, an obvious deadlock is rendered discernible if one considers that our capacity for forming memories can be deeply flawed. In other words, if one cannot remember an event in which one certainly participated – if there is no conscious recollection of it – does this mean that there is a certain break of continuity between the past and the present self? Grice (1941) argues it need not necessarily be so. According to him, each particular content of consciousness can be deemed as a total

temporary state – totality of one’s experience in a given moment. These states, however, are made of a myriad of elements, which, in turn, can potentially be linked to elements in the previous total temporal state – a single temporary element can be a memory of a past element. In other words, it is not necessary that memory exists in consciousness as a coherent and palpable proposition, but transitivity of identity is to be located in the implicit determination of the past experience – sometimes only tacit parts of the whole remember the past. Is this not precisely the picture neuroscience is drawing, namely, that past experience shapes the dispositional character of the present?

In reaction to the notion of continuity of the self, David Hume, whose *Treatise* Fodor (2003) proclaimed as the founding document of cognitive science, argues that there is no such thing as continuity of the self. As a matter of fact, the self as such does not exist at all (Hume, 1967). Instead, the **bundle theory** of the self holds that the self is nothing more than a collection of impressions:

“For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.”

(Hume, 1967, p. 252)

In other words, all there really is, is a rapid flux of perceptions and ideas (which are the effects of impressions) out of which the illusion of the self arises. This idea that does not really exist is merely a human compulsion to connect objects together. According to Hume, this compulsion is a natural inductive tendency of a human being, a tendency that helps us structure the perceptions and confer a causal order on reality.

Granted, there appear to be at least two ways to further develop Hume's position. First, one can argue that the way perceptions are organised in bundles is precisely where the illusion of the self originates. According to this approach, one perceives several differently organised bundles in succession, yet there is a stable connective pattern between them. Namely, for Parfit (1971), when it comes to personal identity, what really matters is not whether we are the same person between two different points in time; instead, what matters is the continuity of memory and character, the psychological relation between succeeding bundles. Thus, what we may interpret as the **theory of psychological continuity** holds that there really is no such thing as the self. However, there is a psychological relation between different bundles and it is this continuity that we come to invest with an illusion of a permanent self.

On the other hand, one can argue that Hume holds an eliminative view as is common to Buddhism. That is, according to the **no-self theory**, the self ultimately has no existence in the phenomenal consciousness:

“But when we look to our experience, there is nothing but impermanence: our bodies, feeling, and thoughts are forever coming and going.”

(Giles, 1993, p. 186)

According to Giles (1993), Buddhism basically distinguishes between two types of speeches. On the one hand, ultimate speech refers to the existing elements that make up the world (e.g., some material entity such as a rock), whereas on the other, conventional speech refers to a mutual agreement and does not point to anything existent. Indeed, conventional speech could be read as what Searle (2010) terms institutional reality – its existential purpose is purely pragmatic, namely, the coordination of social life. Buddhism then identifies the self as a conventional construct that has no ground in experience. It exists only insofar as the conventional speech

creates it. In short, Buddhism views experience as nothing but impermanence, thus identity as a stable locus cannot be located there by principle.

3.3 The phenomenal self

Nonetheless, there seems to be something stable in the wealth of one's perceptions, feelings and thoughts. This brings us to the notion of **experiential standpoint** as a category of the self. Namely, the self can be read as a common denominator of the variety of experiences, that is, a raw experiential element that remains behind once one abstracts from the phenomenal world of qualia and thoughts:¹⁰

“To be conscious of oneself is not to capture a pure self that exists in separation from the stream of consciousness, rather it just entails being conscious of an experience in its first-personal mode of givenness, that is, from ‘within’.”

(Zahavi, 2003, p. 59)

That is to say, for Zahavi (2005), the self is the very subjective position – an integral part of our experiential reality. There is no experience without this perspective, no matter how chaotic or structured it is.¹¹ It is not that this zero-level dimension somehow stands behind perceptions in a theatrical sense; rather, it is the necessary condition and essential element

¹⁰ Qualia being an intrinsic non-representational property, the essence of phenomenal experience in the sense of the term as used by Nagel (1974). Questions such as “*How does it feel like?*” disclose the problem of qualia at its heart.

¹¹ Although Zahavi's basic line of reasoning seems correct, we will rather use the term experiential standpoint instead of first-personal givenness. Namely, the term first-personal givenness might incorrectly invoke any notions of personality or a unity such as ego (Ule, 2011).

of every perception, impression or thought. Every experience has the quality of mineness to it; it always concerns someone.

As Zahavi puts it, this is the core self out of which more complex notions of the self can be built. It is the experiential dimension proper. This is somehow similar to Sartre's (2003) notion of pre-reflective consciousness, which is a state of consciousness prior to appearance of ego. For instance, it refers to the basic act of seeing before any "I" or "me" takes place; before one comprehends any meaning of a given impression; or before one engages in reflection in respect to the object of perception.

3.4 The transcendental self

In attempt to resolve the epistemological deadlock generated by empiricists, Kant (1855) argues that there exists knowledge that is a priori, that precedes sense perception. That is to say, the organised bundle of impressions is not an a posteriori effect of perception; rather, there are schemata that exist beyond senses – indeed, they are transcendental –, which coherently structure the phenomena.

Of course, this is none other than the **transcendental subject**. Namely, for Kant, the transcendental subject is a pure identity-pole, an abstract principle that needs to be retroactively presupposed if one is to account for an organised bundle of phenomena:

"... and I believe that I cognize what is substantial in myself as a transcendental subject, when I have nothing more in thought than the unity of consciousness, which lies at the basis of all determination of cognition."

(Kant, 1855, p. 252)

The transcendental subject – an a priori synthetic unity – is a necessary condition for the experience of the empirical bundle self. In short, the transcendental subject is the inaccessible synthetic kernel of one's experience that generates a causal-temporal order out of the non-sensible noumena – the external reality.

In contrast to empiricism, the relation of the self to reality is turned upside down. Whereas for Hume the pattern of bundles – the self – is shaped by experience, in Kantian universe it is the very active principle that filters reality as such. With the transcendental synthesis the otherwise meaningless and incomprehensible reality is rendered coherent (Azeri, 2010).

In contrast to the self as an experiential standpoint, the transcendental self is not an integral part of phenomena, that is, it is not tacitly manifested in our experience; rather, it is their necessary and constitutive condition:

“To the degree that the bundle of perceptions, that is, the empirical self, is an object of the sensible world, the transcendental unity of apperception appears as the constitutive condition that makes the formation of such bundles possible.”

(Azeri, 2010, p. 272)

In some paradoxical sense, we are where we are not. In other words, one's self exists precisely where one cannot experience it. In Lacanian terms, it ex-sist, that is, it insists from the outside, leaving its traces in phenomenal reality. If pushed to the extreme, one is tempted to claim that we, human beings, are in some profound Kantian sense identical. That is to say, if we conceive of the transcendental subject as the universal filtering of reality shared by all human beings, then, on that transcendental level, we are all the same. What is unique, though, is the particular phenomenal content. One could argue, however, that uniqueness of the transcendental self

resides in its unique position in the noumenal realm. That is, two selves, though identical in their transcendental structure, perhaps cannot occupy the same position amongst the noumena.

3.5 The narrative self

Next, one of the more recently popular approaches in respect to the notion of the self is the hermeneutical approach. According to hermeneutics, (self-)knowledge is a dynamical activity, a never-ending flux of interpretation, an evolving projection (Zahavi, 2003). In terms of identity, the self is a **narrative construction**. It is the way one organises one's life, the narrative of one's experience, the story one tells oneself and others. In addition, one's self is also the story others tell. What is more, it is the story the society speaks through bodies. Indeed, this is not to say there is any storyteller prior to the story; instead, the narrator – the self – emerges through the story itself. As Butler (1988) puts it, the narrative construction is not simply the story we tell ourselves, but it is a story through which we live, in which we come to believe to such extent that we actually feel it as real, as grounded in bodily materiality. In other words, the narrative totalises one's phenomenal consciousness in such a way, by concealing its constructive operations, that one gets to experience the self as an essence where there is no essence to be found in the first place.

However, one should be careful in noticing how the story can be read as an expression of the tacit activity of interpretation:

“Autobiographies are merely the literary expressions of the kind of narrative self-interpretation that we continuously engage in. We consequently need to distinguish the kind of narratives that characterize our ongoing lives from consciously worked-up narratives.”

(Zahavi, 2007, p. 1)

Thus, one should distinguish between the explicit self of language – linguistically expressed autobiography – and the implicit protagonist residing at the centre of one’s experience as an effect of an on-going interpretation of impressions. Both sides should instead be read as two processes acting upon each other, dynamically constituting each other, both being merely constructs.

Given that the narrative self is a dynamical entity, it is in this sense an open-ended project. However, interpretation is always embedded in a social sphere, therefore the very schemes used in story-telling are actually socio-historically conditioned genres (Zahavi, 2007). Hence, one is never the sole author of one’s narrative construction; rather, the self is deeply social, intersubjectively constituted and beyond one’s reach (Butler, 1988; Foucault, 2012; Marshall, 2001).

Dennett (1992) understands the self to be in hermeneutics like what the gravitational centre of an object is in physics:

“But a center of gravity is not an atom or a subatomic particle or any other physical item in the world. It has no mass; it has no color; it has no physical properties at all, except for spatio-temporal location.”

(Dennett, 1992, p. 1)

The centre of gravity is an abstractum – it is a physicist’s concept that can be localised in space, but it has no positive existence of its own. One would try to grasp its materiality in vain. The same goes for the self. The self is a theorist’s fiction. As such, it also has no positive existence. Accordingly, one is doomed to fail if one is to look for its neural correlate in the brain. Nonetheless, the self is an effective fiction. In some sense, it is the **gravitational centre of the narrative**. In fact, it is the gravitational centre of many narratives. Dennett is fully justified in saying that precisely because

the self is a fiction it is possible for a plurality of (incoherent) narratives to be structured around it. By analogy, imagine how it is perfectly reasonable for us to accept inconsistencies that we find in literary fiction, whereas if we find them in theory something is rather deeply flawed. By the same token, like the gravitational centre changes the moment one manipulates the object, the indeterminacy of the narrative centre is rendered determined in a particular self, just to be changed again in the one yet to come.

3.6 The pragmatic self

Pragmatism is a philosophical tradition with a view that philosophy is best done in the absence of Philosophy.¹² Instead, pragmatists argue that knowledge, language and concepts are best discernible in the light of their practical application (Rorty, 1982). That is to say, truth of a proposition is not a matter of a proper representation; on the contrary, it emerges out of usage of words and through action.

William James, one of the key figures of pragmatism, argues that the self is actually an assembly of four different constituents (James, 2007). Three of them – the material self, the social self and the spiritual self – form the “me”, that is, the empirical self, whereas the pure Ego forms the “I”, the unity of consciousness that cannot be subjected to empirical observation. The interplay of these four constituents compiles the unity of the self. The **material self** refers to personal identification with material or positive entities. First and foremost, for James, this is the body. Additionally, the clothes one wears and family members make up the material self to a significant degree. Indeed, here we can think of all other material possessions or identification with thereof. As James puts it, the material self is subjected to a constant flux of change. For instance, if a family member

¹² Capitalisation signifies Philosophy as a search for universal and absolute Truth, uncovering of the ultimate Being.

dies, a part of the **material self** is literally annihilated. Next, the **social self** refers to a variety of personality displays and behaviours in respect to interaction with different individuals or groups. Here, critical to our sense of the social self is how we are recognised within a group. What is more, the social self is not correlated solely to a group, but to a context as well. For example, one might behave differently with the same co-workers in an office than in a bar. Thus, the variety of social selves is always splitting in its nature. For James, we are very well aware of this:

"As a man I pity you, but as an official I must show you no mercy; as a politician I regard him as an ally, but as a moralist I loathe him."

(James, 2007, p. 295)

The last constituent of the “me” is the **spiritual self**. In contrast to the other two empirical selves, the spiritual self is much more enduring and intimate. In short, it designates person’s implicit dispositions, thinking patterns, core values and feelings. In this sense, the material and the social self are organised around the more core spiritual self (Poll & Smith, 2003). Finally, the **pure Ego** is the knower, the very subjective quality of the self. The function of the pure Ego is to provide unity to a conscious experience. However, that is not to say that there is any palpable continuity in consciousness. Rather, every surfacing thought connects or, to put it more precisely, assimilates the preceding thought, in effect establishing the unity. To be sure, a conscious experience of unity. Thus, one is entitled to say that, for James, the pure ego is a totalising function – a cohesive function that retroactively confers the experience of continuity on the incongruent and split thought process.

Evolution of pragmatism brings us to its child, symbolic interactionism. According to the perspective of symbolic interactionism, individual selves are first and foremost social products; there is no proper sense of self

without being exposed to social interaction. Moreover, human beings are essentially understood as seekers of social interaction, whereby every situation carries a defined meaning, which is subjected to further interpretation (Charon, 2004). Borrowing from James' formulations, Mead (1934) also understands the self to be a dialectical interplay of the "I" and the "me". However, according to Mead, the "me" emerges when one internalises the attitudes of others. Basically, only when one is able to take another's perspective one is able to objectify oneself as the "me".

To illustrate, we can imagine a herd of sheep, where one sheep hears the sound of danger sooner than the rest of the herd. In effect, by starting to run, the sentinel causes the rest of the herd (by imitation) to run away from the wolf. Notice, though, how the sentinel had no intention to modify the behaviour of its social surroundings. It simply ran. On the contrary, if we presuppose that the sentinel started running *precisely* because it knew that such act would signal warning to the rest of herd, then we could speak of a social act proper.

Now, suppose the sentinel simulates such social interaction within its consciousness. This is what Mead has in mind when he claims that the "me" emerges only once one internalises the generalised attitudes of others. It is the very anticipated reaction of the generalised representation of society to the stimulus provided by the "I". Coupled with the "I", it constitutes a thought process. When one thinks, one is constantly moving from the "I" to the "me" and vice versa. In this sense, the self is a dialectical unity where the "I" is the activity that purports to bring about a certain change in the "me", just like yelling "*Fire!*" in a crowd is an intentional cry to warn the others. On the contrary, because the stimuli of the "I" are possible only in a relation to the greater whole – the "me", the change in the "me" is also reflected in the "I". At its basic, a change in the "me" opens up new possibilities of interaction for the "I". In short, the self is a dynamic dialogue within the mind.

Finally, there is the **theatrical self**. By developing a dramaturgical approach to microsociology, Goffman (1973) theorises of the self as an actor's role, something to be negotiated on the stage. That is, every time we are confronted with presence of others we maintain certain impressions. The self is an outcome of a performance of a desired self-image. Obviously, performance can succeed or fail at portraying the desired face. Additionally, it is deeply dependant on the reception by the perceivers – participants in real life can deny the actor his role. Call to mind the 2012 presidential elections in Slovenia, where Borut Pahor, one of the strongest candidates, participated in all sorts of manual labour to show his humility and his rank being amongst the “ordinary people”. Recall how, in the midst of all this dramatizing, few of the groups denied Pahor offering them help. Was this not precisely a dismissal of the actor's role? Did not these groups effectively cry: *“You are not one of us, so stop pretending to be!”* ? Nonetheless, not to push the dramaturgical metaphor too far, one is ought to be aware that performing such selves is often not done intentionally. Thus, there are sincere and there are cynical actors. And then there are all that fall between the two extremes.

Furthermore, Goffman understands the front to be the expressive equipment of the performance. First, there is the setting – the fixed parts of the front (say, a lecture room in the case of a professor); second, there is the appearance – insignia gesticulating social status, an active role; third, there is the manner – all the stimuli that signal what kind of interaction is to be expected. The three combine to establish the front where a role can be performed. However, many situations come predefined as to which role can be performed. Thus, one does not have absolute freedom in respect to how one can express one's self-image. Indeed, for Goffman, this is precisely the necessity for fluid functioning of social interaction. We can come to expect what sorts of roles we will encounter, hence we can have reactions – roles – ready at hand. But then again, it is not that we come to consciously learn such predefined sets; rather, they constitute our implicit social knowledge.

We only know parts of roles that have been pre-selected. The rest we fill in as we go – throughout the interaction. In short, Goffman's self is a (relatively dynamic) social role one puts on the moment one enters the social sphere.

3.7 The embodied self

Embodiment is a general approach to cognition manifested in a variety of domains (from artificial intelligence to linguistics) that stresses the importance of the body. According to some views, cognition cannot be separated from bodily actions, whereas others emphasise the importance of the *kind* of body one possesses (Borghi & Cimatti, 2010). In view of the latter, bodily states are of essential importance. This brings us to Antonio Damasio and his neuroscientific tripartite model of the self. For Damasio (2011), the self is built in three successive stages – the most basic is the **protoself**, followed by the construction of the **core self**, finally culminating in the **autobiographical self**. All three selves, no matter how distinct in their functioning, serve the same cause – homeostasis. Damasio constantly reminds us that the mind is just a higher level of life-regulating mechanisms guaranteeing the body the stability of its internal milieu. Therefore, Damasio's self is, above all, the **homeostatic self**.

The protoself, that founding pillar of the self, is a collection of dynamic neural maps that generate images of the most stable bodily aspects:

“It is an integrated collection of separate neural patterns that map, moment by moment, the most stable aspects of the organism's physical structure.”

(Damasio, 2011, p. 190)

The function of the neural structures that make up the protoself is to regulate the most vital aspects of the body – internal milieu and viscera

(muscle contraction in vessel walls, peripheral blood flow, temperature, pain, tissue injury, pH and the levels of O₂ and CO₂). These interoceptive maps are the upper brain stem nuclei¹³, hypothalamus, deeper layers of superior colliculus and younger cerebral cortices, such as cingulate cortex, insular cortex and somatosensory cortices (Damasio & Carvalho, 2013). The input these mapping areas receive is a relatively stable one, therefore a good candidate for the basis of the self. For Damasio, these maps are also felt bodily images – primordial feelings that make the protoself, the essentials of consciousness. These primordial feelings are, in fact, the basis of every other feeling. All more complex feelings are variations thereof, be it a positive or a negative one. Furthermore, there are also master organism maps. These are the maps that schematize the whole body – position of limbs, motion, growth of the body. While they are not essential to the protoself, as they do not provide a source of singularity, they provide a wider reference for the interoceptive maps. For instance, they provide spatial information about a feeling of pain occurring within an arm.

Next, with the core self a protagonist is introduced into the mind. The core self emerges when a perceptual object modifies the protoself:¹⁴

“The core self, then, is created by linking the modified protoself to the object that caused the modification, an object that has now been hallmarked by feeling and enhanced by attention.”

(Damasio, 2011, p. 203)

Thus, what we get is the protoself in interaction with the environment. By encountering an object, the protoself is changed – one experiences a feeling of a change and, in effect, the causative object is made salient. Such simple process constructs what we call mind images. Granted, the process is

¹³ Parabrachial nucleus, nucleus tractus solitaries and periaqueductal gray.

¹⁴ Note that recalled or imagined interactions with objects suffice for the process.

then ceaselessly repeated and one is left with a flux of pulsating images. Damasio terms the process a “wordless narrative”, a precursor of the autobiographical self. The key feature of the core self is the coordination of internal mapping of the body with external mapping of causative objects. However, as Damasio notes, there is no straightforward explanation (i.e., it is not reducible to an innate neural structure) as to why the brain picks a particular object, among the plurality of possible objects to be known. Perhaps, for the moment we can speculate that this might be the lowest level of socialisation. Namely, the social environment might determine as to why a particular stimuli has greater valence in comparison to the competing ones.

Neural candidates for the function appear to be the superior colliculus, as it can perform superpositioning of the internal and the external images; and the thalamus with its capacity to link activations from different cortices. In short, these structures establish a coherence of the pulsating core self (Damasio, 2011).

Lastly, the autobiographical self is literally a conscious autobiography. In other words, it is the collection of memorised history – from social to spiritual experiences. As Damasio puts it, the autobiographical self leads a double life. In contrast to the core self, which is ever present, the autobiographical self can step behind the curtains, operating subconsciously – processing, rearranging and modifying memories. For it to appear, memories (or imaginations) need to be presented as objects into the mapping regions. However, if the core self is about the coordination of internal and external mapping, then the autobiographical self is operating few leagues higher – it needs to coordinate multimodal memories and knowledge that is spread throughout the cerebrum.

Naturally, the autobiographical self is embedded into the processes of the core self: the autobiographical self presents memory as an object to be

known, which is in turn reflected in the protoself, thereby changing it – producing feeling. Sequences of such events are held coherently in a brief window of time, which is the base of the consistency of our experience of autobiography.

In terms of neural substrates, the critical distinction in respect to the other two selves is that the regions responsible for the autobiographical self are not image-making themselves. It is only coordination that happens here. However, its conscious effects – experience of autobiography – are felt in the image-making regions. Damasio calls those coordinators convergence-divergence regions (CDRegions). CDRegions are highly interconnected structures, strategically located within high-order association cortices that can, by means of divergence, reconstruct explicit images in the mapping regions.¹⁵ In this sense, CDRegions represent dispositional, know-how knowledge. Among them, the most important ones appear to be posteromedial cortices. They are the converge-divergence relay stations between other, more specific CDRegions, thus can act as a chief coordinator by forming recursive feedback loops with larger surrounding data sets. In other words, posteromedial cortices are the bosses at the top of the convergence-divergence hierarchy.

To simplify, CDRegions coordinate the signals in different cortices, which process (stored) images with information of their respective modality (vision, touch, etc.), in such a way that information is held relatively coherent. However, the coordination is usually done only in a limited frame of time – as we are very well aware, our streams of thoughts, our own story telling is constantly interrupted by new random pulses of the core self – one ponders on one's past and then suddenly one sees a shiny object. And just like that, the autobiographical self retreats into the shadow of

¹⁵ The polar and medial temporal cortices, the medial prefrontal cortices, the temporoparietal junctions, and the posteromedial cortices (Damasio, 2011).

subconsciousness, anxiously waiting for an opportunity to emerge again in a new, reprocessed form.

No doubt, the plethora of available notions of the self has not been exhausted here. However I believe I captured the general orientations within which many other variations dwell. One might have noticed that not much attention has been given to social aspects of the construction of the self, with the exception of the pragmatic approach. Granted, this will be the subject matter of the following chapter. In it, we shall explore the social sphere and how it might relate to the self.

Chapter 4

The symbolic universe

“Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells.”

Martin Heidegger

4.1 The structure of phenomena

A man is a social creature. There is hardly anyone to be found, who would deny such a statement. Yet, as such, the statement offers itself to several interpretations. It could be said that a man is a social creature simply because he is to be found living with other human beings. In this sense, he also shares many things with other fellow men, such as language, laws or his joy and sadness, as well. Or, it could be that a man first exists as shapeless clay, only to be later moulded by society. According to this view, it is society that makes a man social through lifetime interaction with others. In terms of mutual interaction, man and society engage in a constant struggle of redesigning each other.

Still, then there is another reading of the statement, an interpretation that we intend to pursue in the following chapters and which spurs associations to the passage on structuralism offered above. It is best rendered discernible by the reversal of the provided formula, that is, a *man is a creature of society*. What is implicitly put forward by the reversal is a suggestion that a man, as we know him, emerges only through society. It

follows that the way we conceive of our selves, of others and of our lifeworld is done through and through by the workings of social mechanisms. We dwell in a social sphere, so to say. Or, to put it radically, there is nothing we can comprehend outside the social spectrum. We can grasp our surroundings only in this symbolic universe, thus it is a profound “tool” to interact with reality, yet at the same time the social radically depends on us. We create it, sustain it, modify it and, in the end, annihilate it.

To begin with, let us consider the psychoanalytic notion of ideology. For Žižek (2008), the phenomenal universe of a man is structured by a symbolic order. In structuralistic terms, there is a certain order, an unconscious mediative practice or a self-referential system that regulates the passage from noumena to phenomena. Thus, one’s perception of reality, one’s structuring of phenomena radically depends on this order or, to put it correctly, is actually constituted by it. More precisely, there is no passage from noumena to phenomena in the literal sense of the term, but rather, one is caught in the symbolic order as a substitution for the “raw reality”, as a compensation for inability to grasp things-in-themselves. Here, however, there is a twofold break with the semiotic approach professed by structuralists, as presented above.

First, the symbolic order is the order of the signifier. Thus, the signifier (by analogy, that which in linguistic departments designates words) has primacy over the signified – that which appears in the experiential domain, namely, what we experience as meaning. In contrast to Piaget (1971), who implied that once the arbitrary symbolic structure is established, the relation between the signifier and the signified is relatively fixed, here the relation is not only arbitrary, but also always divided by an impassable barrier (Lacan, 1977). In other words, there is a constant sliding between the signifier and the signified. What is more, the impassable barrier between the two renders symbols powerless in their attempt to occupy that towards which they point to. Call to mind how, when one looks up a meaning of a

particular word in a dictionary, one is always simply referred to other words *ad infinitum*. In a way, one can never reach meaning. It is as if meaning existed only as some kind of implicit totalised background of words that we are destined never to comprehend. Of course, that is not to say that meaning does not exist at all. At the end of the day, in our practical daily life we are able to communicate and organise the complexity of social life in a meaningful fashion. Nonetheless, the lesson to take away here is that the relation between the signifying network, that which mediates our reality, and the signified, the meaning we actually get out of it, is never fixed, therefore always bound to (slow or rapid) change. For this reason the experience of reality is unstable at its core. Consider how our perspectives on life change with the passage of time. Could this not be attributed precisely to incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier?

Second, the decisive post-structuralistic feature of the symbolic order Žižek (2008) advocates is its incompleteness. Yet again, in contrast to the idea of wholeness of structures as argued for by Piaget (1971), Žižek's symbolic order is always marked by a failure. That is, the symbolic order is always incomplete in itself. There is a lack, a void, a contingency or a radical freedom at its very core. This lack is, of course, nothing else but the subject itself. To put it differently, recall how, when attempting to be self-aware, when endeavouring to grasp one's subjectivity, one's self-consciousness, one is always presented with something opaque. There are no thoughts, yet alone words that could pin it down. There is something absolutely elusive to it. In other words, sheer subjectivity is the negation of every determinacy (Myers, 2003). Therefore, insofar as this indicates that subjectivity proper has no positive existence – there is nothing to it, which we could grasp, describe, measure, as we ceaselessly do with other positive entities –, then there is a certain impossibility at work in respect to signification. Or, as Žižek puts it:

“This 'nothing' ultimately stands for the subject itself - that is, it is the empty signifier without signified, which represents the subject. Thus the subject is not directly included in the symbolic order: it is included as the very point at which signification breaks down.”

(Žižek, 2008, p. 109)

Recall what an impossible task it is to describe how it is to feel pleasure or see a colour. Every symbol fails to capture that quality. The moment one puts subjectivity in words one loses its very essence. In effect, what stands for subject in the symbolic order is an empty signifier. As such, it represents the point of instability in the symbolic structure, since there is no signified upon which it could insist. That being said, it follows that subjectivity cannot be symbolised as a matter of fact. This, of course, is not an imperative that reflects an epistemological failure, but, on the contrary, is the ontological principle itself.¹⁶

Now that we have established the basics of the symbolic regulation of phenomenal reality, we can define ideology as a set of ideas, a particular symbolic configuration subjected to the force of history that has an existence of its own and that an individual subscribes to (Žižek, 1989). Although radically dependent on the existence of human beings, ideology nevertheless appears to have some kind of status of objective autonomy. However, this is not to say that each person has identically mediated experience of reality. Besides, what would make us unique then? Accordingly, every individual uniquely subscribes to ideology (Myers, 2003). Or, to put it differently, every individual uniquely subjectivises the objective social structure – ideology – in a form of his own symbolic order. The individuality emerges precisely in the contingent fashion in which the

¹⁶ See Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 for additional exploration of the ontological framework.

symbolic order attempts to fill in the void. Thus each of us comprehends reality in a (even though if only slightly, but still) different way. The meanings we ascribe to things, our practices differ from person to person, yet they are similar enough so that we can participate in the world of symbolic exchange.

In short, ideology is a kind of prism through which one comprehends the meaningful reality, but if one were to take it away, one would perceive only a senseless chaos – one would fall into the pit of pure negative and disruptive subjectivity. That is to say, the symbolic order is a privately acquired version of the ruling ideology or, in other words, the particular socially arranged nexus of meaning, a social structure that gives birth to meaningful reality. Positively, this entails that there is no, nor there can be any, neutral spectator.

4.2 The world of statements

Another notion that deserves our attention is the notion of discourse. In a very broad sense, it refers to a general domain of all statements. However, often it is also used as a term designating a more specific group of statements. For instance, above we spoke of legal discourse. By the same token, we could speak of medical discourse or religious discourse. In this sense, it refers to a group of statements that seem to exhibit a distinctive unity, a coherence of some sort. Last but not least, in the most profound sense, discourse can be deemed as a set of regulated practices that underlie the production of statements, utterances and other semiotic operations (Mills, 2005). The resemblance of the notion of discourse to that of ideology is, indeed, that of social construction of reality. However, here we have to be careful in formulating the notion of social constructivism. That is to say, social constructivism does not deny the existence of external reality – reality external to language; rather, it is that only through discursive registration does materiality gain significance, a meaningful momentum. For instance,

when we look at a tree, there is indeed such a thing as a bundle of shear rawness, yet there is no grasping it as a tree – as a biological entity, life – or, alternatively, as a godly totem without it emerging through discourse (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

The notion of discourse as a set of regulative practices was one of the key concepts employed by philosopher and historian of ideas Michel Foucault. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault discerned discursive regularities, thus exposing the unwritten rules and structures that set the scene for distribution and circulation of given statements (Foucault, 1972).¹⁷ For Foucault, the key aspect of discursive formation is not how particular statements pave their way into existence, but instead, how discourses are formed through the operations of exclusion. In this sense, a coherence of a given discourse is maintained by strategies that exclude the possibilities of materialisation of an alternative mode of practice (say, a different categorisation of objects, a different perspective, etc.). As Foucault puts it:

“... in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality.”

(Foucault, 1981, p. 52)

That is to say, discursive practices regulate what can and what cannot be said at a given moment in society. They ceaselessly hinder a plethora of

¹⁷ Note that this is only but one instance of usage of the notion of discourse. It is worth mentioning that Foucault himself employed the notion in different ways – sometimes as a set of regulated practices, other times as the social sphere itself. After this section, we shall utilise the term in the form of the latter. That is, discourse will be used interchangeably with the notion of social symbolic order.

statements and utterances from entering the circulation, hence designating the limit of speech.

But what is truly crucial in the passage above is the notion of chance events. As far as Foucault maintains that discourse is the limit of our reality – a violence we do to things, a structure we engrave into the heart of raw reality – and as long as without ideology there is no reality as such for Žižek, then what distinguishes the conceptualisation of discourse from ideology is the primacy of time over structure. In other words, discourse is ought not to be theorised as a structure, but as a series of events. Eventful nature of discourse then necessarily implies the emptiness between events, a state of discursive non-existence. Therefore, every discursive event implicitly carries a possibility of its own failure, as it has to establish itself *ex nihilo* again and again. In fact, the repeated re-enactment of an event – practice proper – structures discourse, by warding off the chance of its failure, in such a way that it establishes an appearance of solidity, of being justified in itself. What is more, the appearance of solidity stands straight opposite against our awareness of it. The more a given discourse is solidified, the more our gaze is biased or, to put it differently, the more the discursive structure of our understanding is opaque to us. To formulate the problem in ideological terms: is not ideology of no ideology precisely the most effective ideology, insofar as it annihilates the very possibility of critique of ideology?

Think of scientific paradigms as defined by Kuhn (1996) – a universally recognised model employed by the practitioners of science. In short, scientific paradigms prescribe what is the object of study, how to formulate a hypothesis, how the questions are to be asked, the correct way of designing an experiment, etc. Most of the time it is remarkably difficult for a scientist to seriously consider alternative paradigms or paradigms of other disciplines, as they appear to be completely counter-intuitive and lacking sense. Therefore, as Kuhn has it, a paradigm can be so opaque to us that we often mistake it for the substratum of reality itself.

The order of discourse is produced by a set of procedures that constrain it. These procedures are, of course, the rules of external exclusion (Foucault, 1981). First, there is taboo. Taboo is, obviously, a social prohibition of particular practices and topics. The most obvious ones are those prescribed by law, such as killing or theft, but more interesting ones are those in the form of subtle social norms. For instance, take normal bodily functions. Is not someone who publicly talks of excrements immediately perceived repulsive and transgressive, calling out for sanctioning? Second, there is a distinction between the mad and the sane. What is at stake here is the rule in regard to what will be accepted as existing in the public sphere or, in a way, what has the potential for integration in the shared symbolic universe. In other words, it is not that a mad person does not think or cannot comprehend reality, but his speech will be treated as if it did not exist, in effect rendering him incapable of interacting with the social world. Finally, there is a distinction between truth and falsity. The notion of truth is, for Foucault, inherently connected to power. Those who occupy the positions of authority, the “experts”, where power can speak through them, so to say, are in a position to speak the truth. Recall how experts are often invited to give an opinion on the evening news. Is it not that so very often the content of their opinion seems very trivial, so very commonsensical, yet it at the same time seems invested with so much value, so much more than if I, the common layman, was to utter the same content? Additionally, there is a scope of institutions that classify the statements and if one wants to state something that will be judged as true, it has to fit in the established network of true statements. It is in this sense that Foucauldian power is diffused along the strategies of truth production. Most importantly, what Foucault keeps us persistently aware of is that these distinctions themselves change with the passage of time. Thus, for example, in *Madness and Civilization* we come to know how in the Renaissance madness did not run parallel to a lack of reason or something that needs to be treated and institutionalised, but the distinction between madness and sanity was a distinction between essence and appearance (Foucault, 2001a). In short, the

mad were portrayed as those who had access to the deeper and profounder layers of mystical reality, whereas the sane lived in the world of appearances.

Furthermore, there are internal rules of exclusion: commentary, author-function, discipline and rarefaction. Their function is that of ordering and distribution of statements. Commentary is a procedure by which statements are repeated under the guise of novelty, thus ensuring the stability of discourse. Every culture has major narratives and it is these narratives that we invest with hidden, not yet expressed meaning. Thus, the function of commentary is to express what was “already there”. Next, the author-function is a cohesive principle that we, readers, confer upon a group of diverse texts. That is, if analysed, a group of diverse texts produced by the same person can hardly be ascribed to any identifiable unity, except for the name the author bears, which, indeed, is just a random signifier possessing no inherent meaning. Nonetheless, when reading all these diverse texts, there appears to be some meaningful author behind it, someone we “know”. It is precisely the author-function that organises such perceptual unity. Further, disciplines are limitations of subject areas. Disciplines prescribe methodology, theory and objects of inquiry for producing new propositions that fit with the existing corpus of knowledge within a discipline. Finally, the last principle of exclusion is rarefaction. It indicates the limitation in regard to who can occupy the position of authority. That is, here we are speaking of all the (un-)written rules, procedures and rituals one must first fulfil in order to assume the position of authority from which one’s speech is acknowledged (Foucault, 1981, 2001b).

To sum up, these procedures of exclusion produce regularities that guarantee the stability of discourse, in effect obscuring the essential fragility of its eventful nature. Hence, discourse appears to be a self-regulating entity and those who try to oppose it are left at its mercy, as they need to seek

shelter in the domain of the very thing they try to undermine. In words of Foucault, discourse is not life and its time is not yours.

4.3 The performed reality

Now that we have developed some notions in respect to how our perception of reality is mediated, let us investigate how the construction of the semiotic world proceeds. Granted, what we have encountered so far suggests that there is a deep connection between language and the social structures that mediate our reality. In what follows, I will demonstrate that a semiotic act, as a broader version of a speech act, is a basic operation for the construction of social reality. Let us first examine the notion of performativity.

The performative break in philosophy of language can be said to begin with theoretical developments put forward by John L. Austin. In *How to Do Things With Words*, Austin (1975) argued that speech is often much more than just a tool for describing the world around us. Instead, speaking can be thought of as acting. Or, in other words, there are utterances that perform the very things they seem to describe, hence the name – performative utterances. Lacking in truth-value, as they do not describe a propositional content that could be judged as true or false, performative utterances simply install ontological facts. “*I now pronounce you man and wife!*” is a performative utterance par excellence.

In a similar fashion, Searle (1996) understands a declaration – a performative utterance – to be the basic operation for the construction of social reality. However, Searle is careful in distinguishing between what he terms *brute facts* and *social facts*. Namely, brute facts refer to the facts that exist independently of the mind, such as trees, mountains, the sky, etc. Social facts, on the contrary, owe their existence to subjectivity. That is to say, they exist insofar as we declare them existing. Social facts are, of course,

institutions themselves – money, government, etc. For Searle, the true stuff of social construction is only a social fact. To approach this distinction carefully, let us first examine Searle's view on intentionality in relation to speech acts.¹⁸

The relation between mind states and speech acts lies in the similarity apropos to their intentional structures. For example, both desires and commands have world-to-mind and world-to-word direction of fit, respectively, as the change in the world needs to come about to fit the propositional content of mind and speech act, respectively. Vice versa, beliefs and statements have mind-to-world and word-to-world direction of fit, respectively, as a change in the propositional content of mind and speech act, respectively, needs to fit the state in the world. But the distinctive difference of performative speech acts resides in the double direction of fit of their intentional structure. That is to say, a declaration installs an ontological fact in reality, say, establishing marriage, by representing it as already installed. Or, in other words, we achieve world-to-word direction of fit (change in the world – marriage established) by representing it as existing – word-to-world direction of fit. This operation precisely underlies the construction of all institutional facts (Searle, 2010).

To return to the distinction between brute facts and social facts, let us now consider how this relates to the intentional structures described above. Indeed, language is the most basic institution, as the relation between words and their objects is performatively instituted – nothing but the usage of speech itself can account for us labelling a tree as *a tree*. However, this only pertains to the relation between the signifier and the signified itself. That is to say, for Searle (2008), once the relation is established, this only enables one to re-enact in speech, what already exists in mental states a

¹⁸ Intentionality is one of the key features of the mind. It refers to its aboutness or, to put it differently, its representational capacity. Mind states always refer to some experiential content.

priori. On the contrary, Searle argues that there are no pre-linguistic intentional structures that could account for performative utterances. In other words, there can be no double direction of fit – no social facts – without speech acts.

Searle's distinction between brute facts and social facts is precisely the point where the division between weak and strong social constructivism is to be located. In the hostile Searle-Derrida debate apropos to speech acts theory, Derrida (1977) argued that the intentional structure underlying brute facts is erroneously established as such, since it imposes limits on what is possible as a propositional content of intentionality. In short, as far as weak social constructivism holds that only social facts are performed – socially constructed, whereas speech acts regarding brute facts only express the latent structure inherent to mind, then strong social constructivism views the very latent structures of mind as being subjected to the force of language.

This finally brings us to the notion of performativity as a general principle for the social construction of reality as such. Butler (1988) argues, by combining theoretical developments of Austin and Foucault, that performative acts are indispensable for the production of discourse. Performative acts establish ontological facts by inscribing them in discursive field, but by doing so they conceal their own origin. In other words, by masking their own performative nature – their emergence ex nihilo, they create the illusion of expressing immanent nature of the object they create. They appear as expressing the essence of things. The most obvious example – the central notion of Butler's work – is, of course, gender. For Butler, there is absolutely nothing natural about being a woman. Rather, one does gender, one performs it and by doing so one portrays the appearance of naturalness. As if behaviour, gestures and speech reflected the natural state of body. The performative aspect of social reality can also be discerned by empirical research. For instance, evidence suggests that

people who disclose their intentions publicly significantly hamper the success in respect to attaining the envisaged goal (Gollwitzer, Sheeran, Michalski, & Seifert, 2009). This just might be due to the inscription of a fact within public discourse, in effect constructing the sense of the goal being already attained.

However, it is here that the dramaturgical analogy of performance parts ways with Butler. Whereas in theatre one is fully aware of performing a role, in a normal (out-of-theatre) context one is rarely aware of it. Further, one's performance of a role establishes one's own fidelity to it. That is, by performing a role of a scientist one gets to experience oneself as such and, in effect, one starts to believe one's identity to be the expression of an underlying essence.

The radicality of Butler's version of performativity thus lies in the idea that performances retroactively create the ones doing the performing. Or, as Nietzsche puts it:

“But there is no such substratum; there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything.”

(Nietzsche, 1992, p. 481)

In other words, discourse always precedes us and, in a way, lends itself to us. It offers and burdens us with the grammatical “I” that we faithfully occupy. Hence, in a similar fashion, as for Althusser (1971) ideology interpellates concrete individuals as subjects, for Butler it is the discourse that confers the synthetic “I” on a body. Crucially, this subjection is always established after the fact, so to say. First there is a performative act and only afterwards the illusory self appears, retroactively totalising the experience and masking its traces.

4.4 The autonomy of the social

Regardless of whether we settle for which was there first – the purposeful activity of individual human beings, who represent the positive condition for existence of a given discourse; or the symbolic universe through which subjectivity proper attains its being – one presupposition is striking. Namely, how can it be that a social structure, while ultimately owing its existence to the activity of men, nonetheless seems to possess autonomy and its own rules of governing?

To approach this deadlock, let us ponder over the work of Niklas Luhmann, who, operating in the systems theoretical framework, can offer us some guidance here. Namely, for Luhmann (1995), social systems – a form of autopoietic systems – are not reducible to psychic systems.¹⁹ While psychic systems represent a positive environmental condition for the existence of social systems, that is, psychic systems must interact with each other, the latter are nevertheless operationally closed and produce their own elements, which in turn produce the social system itself.

Luhmann built his theory of social systems on the legacy of Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana, two Chilean biologists, who coined the term autopoiesis. Autopoiesis refers to autonomous systems that have the capacity to reproduce themselves, by producing the very elements that constitute them, like living cells produce their own constitutive elements (Maturana & Varela, 1980). Although Varela & Maturana hesitate in ascribing autopoietic qualities to social systems, Maturana nonetheless understands social systems as emergent autonomous systems, that is, systems that emerge when men interact:

¹⁹ For an observer, when a psychic system is coupled with a biotic system, we get what we usually term a person – an observational unity of body and consciousness.

“Thus, men, through the society that they integrate constitute a cultural system as a homeostatic system that maintains the unity of the cognitive domains of its members by specifying both their concrete and their conceptual experiences.”

(Maturana, 1974, p. 456)

In other words, according to Maturana, a social system acts as an emergent medium or, in his words, as a consensual domain by influence of which separate psychic systems coordinate their experiences and achieve harmony that fosters interaction – social systems specify concrete experiences within cognitive domains. However, whereas in the case of autopoietic systems elements exist for the system that defines them, on the contrary, for Maturana & Varela (1992), a social system exists for its components and not vice versa. Therefore, social systems display some degrees of autonomy at best, but cannot be regarded as autopoietic systems.

Luhmann’s approach to social systems then differs in the fact that he conceptualises the basic element of social systems not as a linguistic domain of cognitive systems, but as a communication. That is, the elementary operation of social systems is communication and, for Luhmann, communication can connect only to communication and nothing else. Communication happens *between* psychic systems and not *within*. As he puts it, only communications can communicate.

Thus, social systems are designated as systems of communications that are operationally closed, therefore irreducible to psychic systems. This is rendered possible by conceptualisation of communication as an event that happens when (at least) two psychic systems interact with each other. Communication itself is designated as a triple selection. First, there is a selection of what will be communicated by alter; second, there is a selection of the form of communication; and third, there is a selection of understanding (interpretation) by ego. Although these selections do occur

in psychic systems, communication as the unity of all three selections cannot be reduced to any one of them separately. Consequently, communication is in this sense truly social.

Furthermore, communications connect to each other and only retroactively establish meaning of previous communications. Therein lies their autopoietic origin. The meaning of a communication is only established by the communication that follows. The process of communication thus automatically limits its own possibilities of differentiation. In other words, only certain ensuing communications successfully connect, effectively guaranteeing the further reproduction of the social system in a cybernetic fashion, whereas those which fail at connecting cause the social system to cease to exist.

Social systems, understood as the environment of a psychic system, act as perturbations that reduce the chaotic complexity of psychic systems by means of interpenetration.²⁰ To put it in a subjective perspective, the way consciousness processes meaning – how one meaningful perception, thought, etc., connects to the following one – is limited by social systems, social acts of communication. The structure of phenomena is (significantly!) influenced, but not determined by communications. The two systems retain their own autonomy and never enter into a hermetically closed loop with each other.

Borrowing from systems theory, one can reconceptualise the notion of symbolic mediation. Namely, the structuring of the phenomenal universe can be envisaged as a series of events that, in a self-referential manner, limit their own possibilities of evolution. In the spirit of Foucault, there is primacy of events over structure. Symbolic order is not an entity that could,

²⁰ Interpenetration is a systems theoretical term designating the way a system can offer its own complexity available for construction of another system. Thus, two systems can limit each other's structural formations.

through abstraction, be thought of as a network of rules. Instead, it is a network marked by a stochastic nature. Its rules of evolution are probabilistic tendencies. One configuration of structure cybernetically follows another and, while doing so, establishes the illusion of continuity and coherence.

One can imagine, in purely theoretical terms, that the official ideology, the meta-narrative we individually subscribe to is but an abstraction that is to be presupposed, an average of unique individual symbolic inscriptions in a given community, a lie we agree to or, in terms of dynamical systems, an attractor toward which the (individual) systems evolve. However, the stability of this abstraction – the fact that a system of ideas can persist through epochs – is due to what I will term semiotic operation.

Semiotic operation stands for any kind of interaction that is registered among individuals; a performative act, be it a verbal communication, a silent gesture or, sometimes, even an act of not doing something, that produces, modifies or sublates the socially arranged nexus of meaning in participating individuals. In other words, it is an act that exerts power on the relations among signs. However, while doing so, semiotic operation is necessarily limited by the rules of communication. Granted, one is inclined to wonder as to what the difference is between semiotic operation and communication. Intuitively, it seems that semiotic operation is not limited to the social sphere proper. That is, while for a communication to emerge, there need be at least two psychic systems interacting, semiotic operation can exist in the private sphere. Indeed, this is the reflection itself – thought processes performing private realities.

Thus, the sum of all effects that structure the practice of individuals and their private realities is more than a sum of all individual practices and is not reducible to the totality of individual cognitions. To put it mystically, there exists a greater spirit in which society dwells. Doubtless, it is with this

conceptual orientation in mind that I shall propose, in the following chapter, a theoretical framework for the role of society in relation to the sense of self.

Chapter 5

Towards a framework

“The human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity — an unending wealth of many representations, images, of which none belongs to him — or which are not present. This night, the interior of nature, that exists here — pure self — in phantasmagorical representations, is night all around it, in which here shoots a bloody head — there another white ghastly apparition, suddenly here before it, and just so disappears. One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye — into a night that becomes awful.”

G.W.F Hegel

The succeeding proposition is a combinatory play of the several ideas we have encountered hitherto. But before we proceed, I will assert a very basic supposition: the self is not an essence. It is not inherently stable, although it sometimes appears to be so. Indeed, the fluid structure supporting that illusion does possess a potentiality to persist through longer periods of time in a relatively stable manner. On the contrary, I believe the self ought to be understood as an activity or a process. In fact, it is a raging battleground where several different active processes collide with each other. That is why the self is highly elusive.

5.1 The negative core

The self is a product of both, the material reality of the body, which we cannot grasp, and the phenomenal realm of consciousness. However, the two are not reducible to each other, although the brain (or any material structure possessing such functional characteristics) does appear to be the necessary condition for the existence of consciousness. The gap that separates the two realms is not a problem to be solved by natural sciences or humanities for that matter; rather, without the gap there would be no consciousness, no perceptions, no appearances, no experience. The gap is essential to this ontological structure. It creates the very possibility of existence for the world of appearances. Conversely, if reality was a chain of a positive order of being allowing for fully deterministic relations among its entities, all there could be was our bodies being fully submerged into such materiality and operating as robots in absence of any spectator (Žižek, 2008). In this “natural” deterministic world, there is no place for consciousness. That is why we need to reformulate reality, instead of being complete causal order, as incomplete. The rupture in this complete scenery is consciousness itself, the lack of any positive content.

Thus, instead of being determined, brain and consciousness interpenetrate each other, to employ a systems theoretical term. Both influence each other in a non-deterministic fashion. Both learn how to construct expectations and appropriate internal processing responses in respect to mutual perturbations. However, both are closed and not accessible to each other. By a way of metaphor, one can imagine the mind to be a canvas on which there is a painting, a modelling of the external world. The perturbation of the brain manifests itself as a disturbance in the topography of the canvas. Some parts of the canvas fold, some areas arise, whereas the others remain unchanged. However, the previously coherent painting is rendered ruptured in terms of its wholeness due to perturbation. Thus the mind accordingly restructures the painting. In terms of

expectations, the mind eventually learns how well certain models work and what kind of perturbations follow each other. By the same token, one can imagine a blindfolded man who has to navigate himself around an unfamiliar room. First, his imagination of the surroundings must be arbitrary (perhaps influenced by his memories of rooms encountered beforehand, to some extent). However, he soon collides with a wall. As a result, he corrects his image of the room. Step by step, he constructs an image that enables him to navigate himself in a relatively efficient manner. In this sense, the visual image has no direct contact with the external reality, just as the painting was not based on any actual objects. The painting itself is really just a leap of faith, an interpretation. There is no right way to paint the canvas. There are many functionally sufficient ways to do it. An implicit relation between the canvas and the reality behind it is all there is.

The foundation of the self are the features of the mind that Damasio (2011) terms as the protoself. These are the so-called most essential features of subjectivity – experiential standpoint, sense of ownership, primordial feelings. It is nothing else but consciousness in its purest being (Zahavi, 2005). Indeed, the subjective kernel is something that can be presupposed, but not experienced directly. One can imagine a thought experiment where one takes away all the contents of the phenomenal consciousness: by stripping the experience of sense perceptions (visual, auditory, haptic, olfactory, gustatory, etc.), thought processes and feelings (proprioception, nociception, etc.), one is left with pure awareness or, in other words, an empty state of being awake. It is the common denominator of anything that appears in consciousness – the pure subject of the classical subject-object opposition, the primordial self.

However, in contrast to Damasio's approach, the primordial self is not a priori embodied in a sense that there is the experience of being localised within a body. Rather, the experience of unity within a body is something

that is learned, as I shall demonstrate in Chapter 6. The primordial feelings of experience are chaotic and non-localised in a radical sense. They just are. We are not speaking here of the problem of where in the body consciousness is to be found. That is, by meditating one can come to understand that the experience of the centre of consciousness being localised a few centimetres up behind one's eyes is only a matter of illusion. One can cultivate awareness of the rest of the body and, by doing so, the primacy of the localisation of consciousness within the skull starts losing its dominion. Instead, the point is that the very experience of the localisation of awareness within *any part of the body*, of having any kind of boundary is itself an illusion. To put it differently, there is nothing natural about the sense of embodiment. One learns how to be imprisoned within the flesh. The primordial self, the pure subject is essentially a disruptive, chaotic and non-localised entity.

Next, I suggest that the brain stem nuclei, which Damasio designates as images of the most stable inner milieu of body, represent materiality with a stable capacity to negate its own positive content. Whereas Damasio argues that the protoself is simply a mapping of the states of the body made conscious, I suggest that this complex stability is only a necessary condition for the self-withdrawal of matter. In other words, to say that the mind emerges out of the brain's capacity to map inner body states is to implicitly propose that there is some hidden causality that we are yet to understand, if given enough time. In this sense, one quietly advances a view that the mind is a deterministic effect of matter that can be explained away. On the contrary, I believe the brain stem nuclei must possess some kind of unique property, structure or complexity that over and over again causes matter to expel itself, creating the empty and awake subject. Although the events leading up to negation of content are deterministic, once positivity expels itself, the gap brings about a rupture in the material causal structure. In effect, to fully reduce the mind to a brain is an ontological and theoretical impossibility.

Granted, we can only speculate as to what this unique property might be – is one to look on a neuronal or a cellular level? Or perhaps, could quantum indeterminacy be the very effect of such a lack of positive content in the fabric of reality? Although quantum mechanics is often dismissed as being relevant to brain sciences, Glimcher (2005) argues that evidence suggests otherwise. Namely, the membrane voltage of a neuron can be shown to be influenced by events occurring on the quantum level. Additionally, synaptic clefts that regulate the inter-neuronal communication display features of quantum indeterminacy:

“Single synapses appear to be indeterminate devices; not apparently indeterminate, but fundamentally indeterminate. At base, physical indeterminacy seems to be a fundamental property of the brain.”

(Glimcher, 2005, p. 49)

In a similar fashion Malabou (2009) argues that brain plasticity should not only be read as flexibility like one can mould clay in several different succeeding shapes. Instead, plasticity ought to be understood as the very explosive resistance against determinacy, the core negative feature of subjectivity opposing the autocratic neuronal regime.

One should not be lead astray by the notion of indeterminacy as to what our target of inquiry is here. The goal is not to (dis)solve the mind-body problem; rather, we are trying to shed light on processes or structures underlying the sense of self. All I purport to suggest is that such notions of indeterminacy might signal the breakage of a positive causal chain in the brain, which is precisely where one could locate the zero-level of subjectivity, the negation of any determinate content – the ontological gap granting the possibility for the existence of phenomena. Wherever we might precisely locate such negativity, be in the structure of brain stem nuclei or

in their unique processing, one thing is certain – we ought to resist the urge to explain it causally!

In Kantian terms, the rupture in matter could be read as the transcendental subject itself; that which exists beyond the phenomena yet it is not part of the noumena – the a priori synthetic activity that structures the phenomenal realm. However, here I rather side with Žižek's reformulation of Kant. That is, the gap itself already is the zero-level of consciousness, the inaccessible and opaque kernel of the phenomenal realm (Žižek, 2008). In other words, there is no gap proper. The gap itself is the primordial subject, the pure awareness disrupting material causality. To put it in other words, the picture I am drawing here is not of two realities being separated by an ontological gap. Instead, the realm of phenomena is located within the material fabric. More precisely, at the very point where material fabric fails, where matter lacks itself. Thus we are left with some kind of paradoxical monism.

One might wonder how all this pertains to the sense of self. Obviously, I am suggesting that this negativity is the source of mineness, of the experiential standpoint, of experience that belongs to someone or something, as Zahavi puts it. The brain stem seems to represent the environment in which such event might occur. However, the crucial step lies in the fact that because subjectivity comes into being by negation, it can do so only by paying the price of being denied the access to material reality. Thus, phenomena appear as a compensation to such loss of direct contact. A model of reality can thereby be constructed. In effect, besides the primordial feeling of awareness, now there is a potentiality for unique contents of one's experience – visual, olfactory, etc. As each single one of us constructs a model, an interpretation of reality in a rather arbitrary manner, one could argue that the basic source of identity can be sought in the unique contents of one's mind. Each of us might have the same phenomenal

building blocks at their disposal, but the configuration is more likely to be unique.

At this point, however, one should not imagine that there is any explicit self-reference occurring within the experiential horizon. There is no reflection, no self-scrutiny. One is not aware of oneself in an explicit sense of the term. Instead, self-awareness exists only implicitly in each perception – it only exists for a subject. One is fully submerged in the phenomenal reality. A sound appears here, a vision there, just to be disrupted by the sensation of hunger. There is no “I” here, no thoughts; one is the totality of sense perceptions and emotions.

In agreement with Damasio, the primordial self is the raw feeling of existence granting its being to the workings of the brain stem. That is to say, the brain stem provides the single most important perturbation for the sense of self, which manifests itself in the form of primordial feelings. Alas, the million-dollar question as to what could the evolutionary purpose of this be, remains troubling. Damasio (2008), for instance, claims that feelings represent the highest level of homeostatic control. That is, feelings are a super map of many other essential body-mapping neural areas and can, by means of a simple binary valence positive/negative, efficiently exert executive control upon the body. For example, the feeling of hunger sets into action a number of corrective responses – seeking information about food resources, vigilance, etc.

Furthermore, if one refuses to settle for epiphenomenalism, one must necessarily presuppose that the mind does exert some kind of influence upon the brain.²¹ Here, I can only offer a brief speculation. By returning to

²¹ Epiphenomenalism is a perspective in the mind-body philosophy that views the mind solely as an effect of the body, without any causal power. Evolutionarily speaking, the mind is a mere accident that adds nothing to the fitness of an individual (McLaughlin, 1989).

the painting analogy, we can imagine that the mind also similarly perturbs neural processing, perhaps by introducing ruptures within the causal synaptic communications, forcing them to adapt their activity once the homeostatic equilibrium is disturbed. In spite of the fact that it is hard to imagine how such basic consciousness can add to the evolutionary fitness of already quite capable brain, its significance nonetheless becomes more feasible when one considers the fully blown human consciousness with its capacity to abstract, reflect, create new ideas, make decisions, destroy concepts and organise extremely complex social life. Essentially, it can establish innovative models of reality that provide a basis for radically novel behaviours, which enable human beings to successfully exploit new niches in (social) environment. Let us now explore in what way this is related to the sense of self.

5.2 The phenomenal lack

To be sure, brain structures generating the primordial feelings are not restricted only to human beings. They are, phylogenetically speaking, old structures found in non-human mammals, birds, reptiles and older species as well (Damasio & Carvalho, 2013). That is to say, if the brain stem thesis holds, many animal species possess some elementary (or more complex) form of consciousness. The more complex the brain, the richer becomes the phenomenal content. However, in each and every case, whatever appears in phenomenal consciousness is a means to compensate for the loss of direct access to reality.

Damasio's core self evolves insofar as the brain's capacity to map interior bodily states and sense perceptions evolves. When neural areas that map visual inputs are added to the brain, so do visual phenomena appear in the mind. This is because these neural structures create the necessary perturbations for visual phenomena to exist. Indeed, the presupposition underlying this hypothesis is as follows: all Damasio's neural maps create

their own conscious kernel. Thus, brain stem creates awareness filled with primordial feelings, whereas the somatosensory cortex establishes awareness filled with haptic percepts. When objects of interaction (e.g., visual and haptic constructs appearing within the mind, representing objects the organism is interacting with) become salient and distinguishable from the image of the body, the core self emerges within the mind. There is interaction with the world. Note, however, we are still not talking of self-awareness proper. Here, we are speaking of pre-symbolic phenomenal reality. There are perceptions that bear some meaningful associations to feelings, nothing more. Images of food sources are invested with sensations of satisfaction, fullness. I imagine the core self to be something what animals might possess and human beings prior to developing theory of mind.²² The core self is still fully submerged in the phenomena, but the image of the body acquires the central spot, a higher importance. This occurs through learning by interacting with the world. For instance, visual feedback of a needle being stuck in one's leg is associated with the originally non-localised feeling of pain. In effect, embodiment starts to take place. Thus the body obtains a cartographical status as a special image in respect to images of other objects.

Be that as it may, it seems that Damasio's final step – the autobiographical self – cannot account for the fully blown narrative self, the self we are so familiar with, the "I" from which I speak. Insofar as the autobiographical self is a coherent coordination of images within a given timeframe, this by no means entails why there ought to be any significant change within the mind in respect to the core self. The relevant difference might be that phenomena appear more organised, more stable. Additionally, previously encountered phenomena can be coherently

²² Theory of mind is a capacity of an individual to infer that others also possess their own mental states – beliefs, desires, etc. (Premack & Woodruff, 1978).

replayed – memory. But there is still no grammatical “I”, no self-awareness proper.

For this to happen, I propose that the following event has to occur: as for the emergence of consciousness to take place there needs to be an expulsion – negation – of positive being, likewise for the genuine “I” to come about there has to be a negation of phenomena. As a matter of fact, the ontological failure is repeated within the phenomenal realm; or, in other words, the ontological structure gets included in the phenomenal content. As a matter of necessity, the emergence of self-awareness is supplemented with the emergence of language, the social symbolic order. They co-emerge, one being the necessary condition for the existence of the other. Like Mead (1934) puts it, a man is social through and through. As the phenomenal realm suffers rupture, it simultaneously calls out to the power of language, to mediate the now consciously aware experience of chaotic phenomena. Could not this event be read through Žižek (2008)? That is, the point of psychotic self-withdrawal, of absolute negativity, of disruptive imagination at its zero-level - in other words, the birth of human subjectivity – had to be supplemented with symbolic mediation. In short, the rupture of the savage’s full immersion in the phenomenal reality created a loss of coherence within the all-pervasive lifeworld, hence the need for compensation with the symbolic universe that violently imposes structure. To put it another way, the symbolic order is the very attempt to cover the abyss of negativity, to fill in the lack of a phenomenon. In a way, due to the loss of unity of phenomena, a man is then caught within the symbolic, which makes no appeal beyond itself, as Piaget (1971) says of structures. However, on the bright side, there is now a capacity for thought proper, as the introduced void creates distance towards phenomena. One can ponder over phenomena by gazing through ideological lenses. “Objective” reality is thereby constituted. Objects become individual entities at disposal for thoughtful manipulation. For this reasons precisely, the pinnacle of the human mind, as we know it, is intimately tied with discourse. Insofar as one

reflects, one is caught within discourse and only through discourse one can attain that reflective distance. That is the true power of a man and also his ultimate prison.

The hypothesis that negation is repeated in the phenomenal realm can be pushed even further. Could it not be said that discourse does not only fill in the void, thus mediating the experience of phenomena; instead, what if discourse introduces the very lack itself? The notion that ideology interpellates subjects can then be read in a much more intimate way (Althusser, 1971). It is not that ideology just creates symbolic identities; rather, it creates a possibility of the reflective subject itself.

It follows, if we approach the emergence of the self-aware “I” from Foucauldian perspective and postulate that symbolic mediation is an event, we can reformulate Damasio’s conception of normal functioning of the mind as shuffling between the autobiographical self and the core self. By analogy, recall the famous passage from Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, where he examines Dasein’s relationships with objects (Heidegger, 2008). When an object is ready-at-hand, namely, when one is yielding a hammer, one’s full immersion in the activity renders the hammer fully transparent. Phenomenally speaking, the hammer is not a separate object. It is an intimate part of the experiential horizon. But then suddenly the hammer breaks down and, in effect, reflection ensues. One becomes aware of the hammer. The hammer becomes present-at-hand, thus a separate object that one can contemplate.

Does not this occur precisely because discourse enters and totalises the experience, conferring a symbol that insists a unity upon the hammer? In other words, is the narrative self-aware subject not precisely the continuous (re-)enactment of discourse? Indeed, consequences of such hypothesis demand that the narrative self does not exist in the discursive in-between. Normal functioning of the human mind consists of an interplay between

being fully submerged in the phenomenal realm and attaining reflective distance towards it, by means of discursive interpellations. No doubt, the enactment of discourse is so frequent and totalising that it creates the illusion of being the very founding pillar of the human mind - the all-pervasive "I", which is, at the end of the day, not really always there.

From the perspective of the mind, the notion of negation implies that there could be no gradual evolution, no in-between state between animals and human beings. Namely, it is quite impossible to imagine that the path from absolute immersion in phenomena to the development of self-awareness and the world of Logos was a gradual process. The negation either happens, either it does not. In evolutionary terms, at some point there had to be a quantum leap, a point in time where human subjectivity and the universe of discourse appeared *ex nihilo*, both standing autonomously, yet on the other hand both existentially dependant on each other. In short, the chicken and the egg had to appear together.

Thus we are now left with a fully blown human subjectivity. One is aware of oneself and his surroundings. Furthermore, one can make meaning, with the use of language, of the lifeworld that one is contingently thrown in. For the first time, a man can grasp reality by approaching it through a symbol. This web of signifiers is precisely what I argue to be the essence of the narrative self. It is the objective social structure subjectively appropriated by the savage self. Moreover, if one accepts the proposition that discourse is contingently subjectivised, then one should risk the speculation that each single one of us is very likely to be unique in this sense. The way we make meaning of the world is a very private matter and, for a fully developed human mind, it constitutes the meaningful core of one's being.

The notion of contingency cannot be emphasised enough. There is no absolute way to justify as to why the symbolic structure attains a certain

configuration and not the other. The meaning of a symbol can nonetheless be limited by socio-historical conditions (which are themselves contingent): for instance, in capitalistic society the notion of freedom gravitates around the freedom of market, the freedom of merchandise; whereas in socialism it gravitates around security precisely before the brutality of the unpredictable and indifferent forces of the market. Individual minds therefore appropriate variations of such pre-given notions, which constitute their own experience of the meaning of freedom.

By the same token, we can imagine that the proto-symbolic environment in which the savage lived imposed some limits on the emergence of symbolic reality. That is to say, although discursive regularities prescribe which objects attain significance – which objects are objects of thought –, there could have been some behavioural regularities that offered themselves for signification. Namely, animals do exhibit organised social life and their behaviour does seem to be structured by regularities. Mirror neurons, for instance, have been put forward in recent years as a driving force behind cultural evolution (Oberman & Ramachandran, 2009). Indeed, present in several animal species, mirror neurons enable imitation, in effect a consistent spread of similar behaviour across a population. One could therefore speak of a proto-culture of the animal world. In this sense, it is not hard to imagine that when human subjectivity emerged, there already was a rich social environment invested with regularities waiting to be occupied by symbols, that is, symbols that granted those regularities eternity within the Word. Signification, nevertheless, had to be accompanied by some degree of contingency by principle.

At this point, two things ought to be emphasised. The coherence of experience and the meaning of experience are two separate things,

independent of each other.²³ Nonetheless, the two do very likely reinforce each other. The coherence of experience refers specifically to the unitary appearance of phenomena. This is the way one's experience feels naturally linked to the preceding one, the way phenomena seem to be intuitively organised in a causal order, the way one instinctively feels as residing within the body as a whole. The meaning, on the other hand, is completely dependant on the symbolic order. It has nothing to do with the coherence of phenomena. The meaning of a symbol exists only on the background of other symbols. Every meaning evokes traces to other meanings *ad infinitum*. For the purpose of analogy, one can think of it as Cartesian *cogito*. Theoretically, one could imagine perceiving pure chaos – disintegration of coherence – while still trying to make sense of that chaotic perturbation with the use of thoughts. In the face of chaos, one can still form meaningful questions, to say the least.

In a nutshell, I understand the self to be an illusion arising out of interplay of two constructs. First, there is the learned illusion of coherence of experience – something we could term the embodied core self - and, second, there is the enactive process of symbolic mediation of phenomena - the unique configuration of symbols that establishes the horizon of meaning, the understanding of reality that makes us who we are and the ground of the narrative self.

²³ In Chapter 6 I explore the difference in greater detail.

5.3 Reflexive performativity

Now, let us explore the nature of interaction between the self and society. The working hypothesis states that the symbolic order structuring one's reality is objective social symbolic order subjectivised, that is, appropriated by an individual in a contingent manner.

For the moment, let us assume that different minds construct images of reality in a relatively similar fashion. Thus, phenomena that appear in one's mind are the same as phenomena that appear in someone else's mind. Next, insofar as we subscribe to the notion of the social symbolic order through a performative reading thereof, the meaning of phenomena is enacted or, in other words, performed. Society collectively enacts the meaning of, say, a tea party, establishing its essence retroactively.

Note that there are two kinds of identities that we can speak of here. If we approach symbolic identity through Goffman (1973), then identity is something that is theatrically projected and negotiated in the social sphere. One presents oneself as a politician in the presence of others. In a social situation, one acts in accord with social norms and expectations. On the other hand, for Butler (1988), social identity eventually becomes internalised. The gap between one's essential nothingness and social identity gets obscured. Identity occupies one's soul. In effect, one experiences oneself profoundly through the identity of, say, a politician. The performative construct becomes private as well.

We can translate the difference into the objective and the subjective social symbolic order. In other words, Goffman's self should not be merely interpreted as a public identity represented within the mind; instead, the public identity resides in a truly *social* sphere, that is, independent of one's mind and, crucially, irreducible to a single mind. Nevertheless, the nature of

the social sphere is purely virtual – one will seek it in the materiality of external reality in vain. Instead, it emerges through (verbal and non-verbal) communications as a reduction of complexity, when two impenetrable minds interact, where transmission of information between (at least) two black boxes is impossible (Luhmann, 1995). It is its own system and, hence, it obeys its own rules of processing information.

Thus, I propose that although the structure of both the objective and the subjective symbolic order is the same by nature, their respective configurations are not. There is always a minimal discrepancy between the two. At the first instance, when the narrative self emerges, we can imagine that discrepancy is rather vast. That is, the meanings one ascribes to things and words might not have much to do with regularities of the cultural surroundings. However, as one interacts with the environment, one receives feedback, like when one's body hits into a wall, one's visual representation of an environment adapts accordingly. The same goes for symbolic structures. The external limitations imposed on behavioural possibilities of an individual introduce constraints as to how the subjective symbolic structures are to be configured, how one can make meaning of the world.²⁴ In this sense, the freedom of subjectivisation is flexible to some degree, just enough to foster the functioning of society.

Inasmuch as the objective symbolic order is performed, the constraints on behavioural possibilities – what can be said or done and what not – exist only insofar as they are enacted by individuals and limited by internal rules of communications. To put it differently, each time one carries out a semiotic operation, one enacts the subjective configuration of signifiers and, at the same time, attempts to modify the objective configuration of

²⁴ For instance, an example of such external limitations can be physical or verbal violence. One risks being attacked if one does not act as one should, even if one does so without intending it or, in other words, if one's meaning-making apparatus is simply different.

signifiers in accord with one's perspective. This can be done intentionally or unintentionally, successfully or unsuccessfully. In terms of performative speech acts, is this not already implied by Austin (1975) and his distinction between illocutionary speech acts and perlocutionary speech acts? Namely, illocutions are performative acts that happen when a sovereign authority declares something, thus installing an ontological effect, like when George W. Bush declared war on Iraq. On the contrary, perlocutions are performative acts that succeed only if given conditions are met. In other words, perlocutions carry the possibility of failure, like when Kim Jong-un attempted to establish himself as an international power just to end up becoming an Internet meme – an object of ridicule. In short, I can intentionally try to make others see me as a prominent researcher, but the ultimate success of such endeavour is out of my reach. In the end, everything is always socially negotiated.

Last but not least, the nature of symbolic orders is highly reflexive. For Žižek (2007), every performative act does not only install identity, but also changes the very relations among signifiers, no matter how implicit and insignificant that might be. In other words, every speech act contains within its propositional content the speech act itself. Is this not similar to what Luhmann (1995) says of communications, namely, that information is also always information about its own context? When one says "Hello!" one also implicitly says "One is saying 'Hello!'" To exaggerate, an observer is always entitled to wonder what the intentions of the speaker are. When one publicly declares one is a creative person, one also declares that one thinks of oneself as creative. In effect, new meanings get associated with him – one might be therefrom perceived as self-absorbed, to name an example. Society's treatment and perception of him changes because his status, his identity changed. Therefore every speech act is always minimally exhibitionistic and cybernetic. The reflexive nature of performativity tremendously complicates the narrative self.

To sum up, the primordial self first emerges as a rupture in the fabric of reality. This is the pure subjectivity. If there are any representations, they are chaotic. Once the brain is well enough equipped to support the existence of consciousness rich with qualia, coherence is established a posteriori as a result of interaction, in a Humean fashion. This is the core self. Finally, the decentred, narrative self emerges when the performed objective symbolic order is subjectivised, rupturing and, consequently, mediating the phenomenal realm. This marks the birth of reflection, the emergence of experience of meaningful reality by an aware unity, the “I”.

Chapter 6

Discussion

“And those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music.”

Friedrich W. Nietzsche

6.1 Phenomena do not care for meaning

One of the central points of the proposed framework is the distinction between the experience of phenomenal coherence and the experience of meaning. It is this distinction that we shall inquire here. First, let us approach the problem of unity.

Lacan (2001) argues that the experience of unity arises due to misidentification with an external object. That is, between the first six and eighteen months of development, children show fascination with images of themselves and others in mirrors – this is the so-called *mirror stage*. For Lacan, the primary experience of a child is chaotic. Their experience of a body is not that of a coherent whole, but of a fragmented circus. This is largely due to the underdevelopment of an infant’s motor skills. However, when an infant observes a mirror or some other reflective surface, he gets confronted with a tension between the appearance of unity and the experience of fragmentation. This occurs because fragmented feelings of initiated bodily movements seem to be correlated with coherent

movements of the specular image. To resolve the tension, the infant assumes the identity of the image. In other words, the infant misidentifies himself with an external image, thereby internalising it in a form of unitary experience. Consequently, one's private sense of embodiment exists primarily due to alienation. One feels one's body as a unit insofar as one misidentifies with a foreign body. Thus, even for an adult the experience of having a body remains fiction, which is constantly intimidated by a threat of underlying disembodiment.

Although, for Lacan, the mirror stage designates the birth of the self, the point of emergence of the "I", I suggest that this does not happen in the full sense yet. Rather, here we are still dealing with the proto-symbolic phenomenal consciousness. Misidentification through interaction with the environment merely imposes unity upon the initially dismembered body. Additionally, I propose that the mirror stage is only but a tip of the iceberg in terms of the construction of perceptual order. That is, long before phenomena attain structure in a Humean fashion – by perceiving events that appear together, the mind constructs expectations that refer to connective causality between separate events (Hume, 1967). Although phenomena appear in the same way as they would prior to the construction of any idea of causality, such an idea confers a profound sense of cohesion on the relation between events, which at best appears only in a conjoined manner. This is the essence of the experience of a coherent world. As human beings are creatures of sight, the proposition might be hard to imagine at the first instance. Hence, it is more reasonable to demonstrate it in terms of auditory perception.²⁵ Is it not that if one closes one's eyes while

²⁵ From a neural point of view, stimuli for both visual and auditory perception are of the same nature. Though they arrive through different sensory channels, they all result from the material properties of the world. Visual perception is based on the reflection of light – the perception of movement of an object is an effect of change in retina detecting photons, whereas auditory perception is based on the detection of change in air pressure.

standing on a busy street and attempts to perceive it through sounds, the first impression is rather lacking in causal certainty?

Next, insofar as Lacan's conception of ego and agency coincide, we can invoke the bizarre alien hand syndrome – a neurological disorder whereby movements of one hand are perceived as caused by another mind, without one's conscious will. Although the disorder is usually referred to in problematisation of agency and free will, there is another aspect worth considering. That is, for normal goal-oriented behaviour there needs to be a unified conceptual order in terms of perception, whereas in the case of the alien hand syndrome, the gestalt is marked by a disturbance (Geschwind, 1965). Namely, patients often report a sense of dissociation or some kind of sensory deficit in contrast to a coherent visual feedback (Aboitiz et al., 2003). The emerging explanation is that the syndrome occurs largely due to lesions damaging the connectivity of the motor cortex, whereby the motor cortex attains certain degrees of autonomy (Kayser, Sun, & D'Esposito, 2009). Does this not invoke references to Lacan's thesis, namely that fragmented experience of the body is due to underdevelopment of motor skills? What if this underdevelopment is precisely the not yet formed connective regularities of the motor cortex, generating the infant's fragmented and dissociative experience?

Furthermore, recall the equally bizarre body identity integrity disorder that seems to emerge due to a mismatch between the patient's body and his representation thereof – the body scheme or, in our terms, phenomenal body (Bayne & Levy, 2005). The disorder is characterised by a patient's ultimate denial of ownership of one of his limbs:

“The more I gazed at that cylinder of chalk, the more alien and incomprehensible it appeared to me. I could no longer feel it as

Thus, both sensory organs do not perceive objects in-themselves, but the effects they produce.

mine, as part of me. It seemed to bear no relation whatever to me. It was absolutely not-me – and yet, impossibly, it was attached to me – and even more impossibly, continuous with me.”

(Sacks, 1998, p. 51)

Alterity of the limb can be so radical that patients start to seek solution in removal of the foreign limb. In 1997, a case of body identity integrity disorder in Scotland actually ended up in amputation. In fact, two years later the patient reported life improvement (Bayne & Levy, 2005).

Perhaps the most illustrative case of a lack of unity of visual phenomena is visual apperceptive agnosia – the inability to perceive objects as whole. Whereas patients can perceive parts of objects correctly, they cannot integrate them in a coherent whole, rendering patients incapable to identify them (Behrmann & Kimchi, 2003). For instance, Oliver Sacks speaks of a patient who mistook his wife for a hat:

“He also appeared to have decided that examination was over, and started to look around for his hat. He reached out his hand, and took hold of his wife’s head, tried to lift it off, to put it on.”

(Sacks, 1986, p. 10)

What is more, the disorder has nothing to do with any kind of semantic deficits. When presented with an object in a different modality, patients have no problems naming it (Behrmann & Kimchi, 2003). That is, if Sacks’ patient spoke with his wife over the phone, he would have no problems identifying her.

Although there are several other neurological disorders that pertain to our discussion, the few cases presented above ought to suffice to demonstrate that the ability to process meaning seems to be an independent faculty in respect to sensory perceptions. In face of perceptual

disturbances or disintegration of gestalt, the uniquely private meaning-making faculty – the structure that gives rise to the narrative self – can remain perfectly intact. In respect to Descartes, ought we not give credit where credit is due? That is, does reading of Cartesian cogito through the distinction between phenomena and meaning not refer to Descartes' intuition apropos to duality? Granted, we are not reaffirming Cartesian duality per se; rather, the assertion is that there are two distinct fundamental processes inherent to the human mind.

Is the distinction not also often discernible in experiences popularly categorised under the umbrella term mysticism? Henk Barendregt, a Dutch logician, describes Buddhist phenomenology as experienced during an intensive meditative retreat:

“The experience is indescribable. The following symptoms are some indications of what happens

- *Chaos: perception is completely confused; everything is turning.*
- *Anxiety: there is an 'infinitely' strong anxiety; all other anxieties seem to be derived from this basic one.*
- *Disgust: one is extremely sick; the stomach turns and one has to vomit.*
- *Craziness: it feels as if one is crazy; the mind and the body are present, but there is no ego anymore that controls everything.*

The experience is more terrible than death, at least that is how it feels like. Nevertheless thinking operates as usual.”

(Barendregt, 1988, p. 47)

In addition, the pluralistic manifestations of mystical experiences can also offer us an insight into the constructivist nature of meaning. Namely, it is well documented that mystical experiences can significantly restructure the way we confer meaning on life – recall the reports on near-death experiences (Greyson, 1993; van Lommel, van Wees, Meyers, & Elfferich, 2001) or experimentations with entheogens (Doblin, 1991; Griffiths, Richards, Johnson, McCann, & Jesse, 2008; Pahnke & Richards, 1966).²⁶ Is it not that, more often than not, people report some dramatic change in life that lasts over longer periods of time?²⁷ Could we not attribute this phenomenon to a change of the symbolic order, a shuffling of signifiers that manifests itself in a change of valuations? One indication supporting such hypothesis might be the demonstrated potential of LSD and psilocybin to reduce anxiety levels in terminal cancer patients (Gasser et al., 2014; Grob, 2007; Grob et al., 2011). That is, several patients reported that they found it easier to accept death after a profound drug-induced experience. Indeed, one could speculate that such experience can restructure the symbolic order, thus change the associations of meanings in relation to the idea of death. In effect, the valuation of the idea of death changes, thereby connecting new ways of experience to it – novel emotional backgrounds.

There is yet another interesting connection, which should be taken with caution due to its speculative nature. Namely, an fMRI study has shown that administration of psilocybin tends to decrease action and connectivity in the brain (Carhart-Harris et al., 2012). This invokes Damasio's (2011) thesis that neural mechanisms crucial to the narrative self are connective hubs that coordinate neural activity. However, the dilemma in positing a connection is due to the fMRI study investigating psychedelic experience in

²⁶ The term entheogen refers to a psychoactive substance used in a spiritual context (Godlaski, 2011).

²⁷ Indeed, on the spectrum of valuation, change can vary from being positive through neutral and all the way to extremely negative.

general and not focusing on the sense of self or experience of meaning *per se*.

To conclude, acting as a catalyst for structural transformation is thus always a latent potentiality of mystical experiences. That is to say, it is the newly emerged symbolic structure that confers new meaning on the experience of a thing. However, at the point of deconstruction, when phenomena appear at their face value, meaning is absent, since there is no symbolic structure. This is precisely why Hume (1967) can claim that there is no “I” in impressions, insofar as we conceptualise impressions as phenomena experienced pre-reflectively (Sartre, 2003). The unity of a phenomenon’s identity, its meaning, can exist only in an idea or its externalised twin – a symbol. That being said, in order to meaningfully instantiate a thing in an idea, we need to murder it first – we need to discard all of its qualitative features and make room for its being. On the contrary, the experience of causality and spatio-temporal coherence of phenomena can exist prior to the rise of Logos.

6.2 Materiality of meaning

In this section we will discuss the link between the experience of the meaning of a given phenomenon and the external reality. In other words, we will investigate how the subjective meaning is grounded in the objective materiality.

Recall that we have advanced a thesis that the meaning of a thing resides in a signifier, whereas the meaning of a signifier exists only in relation to other signifiers. When one contemplates the meaning of a given table, one can ask thousands of questions as to what makes that table a table, but there is no right way to ask that question. Granted, its tableness resides in a symbol that insists itself on it. One can invoke other symbols in order to explain that meaning, but that strategy is rather futile as one ends

up roaming in infinite circles. Meaning is thus a very paradoxical creature. Meaningfulness comes into being only through a meaningless medium – signifiers.

However, there is another crucial component of meaning, besides being occupied by a symbol. Of course, we are speaking of feelings. To illuminate this supposition, we need to reverse the classical distinction between reason and feelings. That is, pure instrumental reasoning is not to be opposed to emotions; instead, the two make an intimate couple (Precht, 2011). Is it not that even formal logic ultimately resides in a *feeling* of making sense? Namely, does not reason always fall back on some minimal valuations that can only be reduced to feelings of being right or wrong?²⁸ It follows that the meaning of a symbol, which is an effect of a particular symbolic structure, is always grounded in some zero-level feeling of correctness. One should thus always supplement “*This sounds right*” with its underlying support “*This feels right*”. In some sense, the stability of a symbolic structure is secured by emotions.

Furthermore, is the relationship between meaning and feelings not implied in two similar disorders – derealisation and depersonalisation? Namely, the experience of derealisation usually involves a lack of emotional colouring of perception and a feeling of reality being unreal (Radovic & Radovic, 2002). Make no mistake, this is not to propose that derealisation represents a state of meaninglessness, but rather a radical change of meaning due to a general shift in existential feelings (Colombetti & Ratcliffe, 2012). It ought to be emphasised that we are not reducing meaning or reasoning to feelings. The two faculties only interact and reinforce each other. To simplify, feelings anchor the socially acceptable forms of making meaning and reasoning.

²⁸ Note that when we say that reason falls back on valuations this does not entail that reason is reducible to valuations (or feelings). The feeling of being right only represents reason's ultimate support for its contingent form.

Moreover, recall the noetic quality of mystical experiences as defined by William James:

“They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time.”

(James, 2002)

It refers to the experience of the deep kernel of wisdom, of the higher truth usually not accessible to ordinary human understanding. Could this not be the final frontier of understanding, the guardian of meaning, namely, the pure feeling? Would it not be a perfect irony if it turned out that noetic wisdom was ineffable precisely because there was no meaning in it, but one simply dwelt in the feeling of making sense?

Insofar as we accept the bond between meaning and feelings, then meaning is deeply rooted in the body. Bring to mind Damasio’s notion of primordial feelings as arising out of the brain’s capacity to map bodily states. There, any change in bodily states, say, an arm motion, generates a new sensation. The recent theoretical shift apropos to neural representation of concepts seems to point in our direction. Namely, Gallese and Lakoff (2005) argue that our capacity to understand relies heavily on the sensory-motor apparatus of the brain. The nature of perception and action is inherent to concepts or, in other words, abstraction is an embodied effect. This is based on the argument that, from the point of view of the brain, imagination employs the same neural mechanisms as perception and action. Thus, the same neurons fire when I grasp an object and when I imagine grasping an object.²⁹ Granted, the latter is coupled with inhibition

²⁹ Similarity between perception and imagination invokes possible parallels between neuroscience and *The Argument from Illusion*. Namely, according to the argument, we never perceive objects directly, but only mental representations – sense-data – thereof (Ayer, 1940). Therefore, it is in principle impossible to separate illusion from perception.

of the executive motor sequence – the actual movement of the arm. For Gallese and Lakoff, simulation (i.e., imagination) has the capacity to carry out abstract reasoning as well. When the premotor cortex fires its functional schemas, while the motor cortex remains inhibited, it characterises concept inferences (ways of manipulating it, its spatial location, force and velocity of arm, etc.) – the aspects of an object that define a concept or a category. These inferences can combine together by means of metaphor to establish more abstracts concepts:

“For example, the conceptual metaphor love is a journey maps travelers to lovers, vehicles to relationships, destinations to common life goals...”

(Gallese & Lakoff, 2005, p. 470)

In short, (embodied) concepts are sensory-motor action-imaginative circuits – interactional schemas – that define the possibilities of interaction with an object. Thus, according to Gallese & Lakoff, abstraction arises out of concrete action. In every handling of a concrete object implicitly lies conceptual inference thereof.

Even though imagination does not execute the actual change of bodily stature, it does change the internal milieu. For instance, imagining physical exercise can result in an increased heart beat (Decety, Jeannerod, Germain, & Pastene, 1991). As we already know, a change in internal milieu entails a change in feelings. Hence, what if every concept invokes a reference to some sensory-motor circuit, in effect rendering its own way of being felt? Crucially, Gallese & Lakoff suggest that embodied concepts are not symbols, but dynamic neural schemas. This is, indeed, in agreement with our hypothesis, namely, that the symbolic – the meaning of a concept – dwells

Does not the thesis that imagination and perception employ the same neural mechanisms support such idea? Are we all not simply “normalised” psychotics?

only in our minds and in the social symbolic sphere. There is no concept or idea to be found in the brain, just like the experience of red colour cannot be derived out of the visual cortex; instead, there are only neural perturbations – the necessary conditions – occurring as an effect of sensory-motor processing. Concepts, just like qualia, are ultimately not reducible to brain states.

Could we not then risk a hypothesis that the connection between the experience of meaning and materiality of a person being immersed in a social environment is to be located precisely in feelings? On the one hand, one learns how to behave in society, what is the right and what is the wrong way of doing things. One's way of conducting oneself is thus social at heart. All these bodily actions are, indeed, mapped in the brain, thereby producing, by means of perturbations, subjective feelings. On the other hand, the emerging feelings consequently anchor the subjectively appropriated symbolic order. The way one makes meaning of reality is felt in a certain way. At its basic, it feels right. The sensation of being right or making sense is a result of a positive social feedback to "normalised" behaviour that is guided by (initially) contingent reason.

With this orientation in mind, we can conceptualise actions, via feelings, as constituents of meaning. This is, of course, none other than the Marxist notion of ideology as an effect of the activity of people (Marx & Engels, 1976). To put it differently, the ideas and beliefs people have arise out of their behaviour and social interactions. The process is so bullet proof that it need not be necessarily accompanied by one's unawareness of it. Recall the cynical formula of ideology:

"They know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it."

(Žižek, 1989, p. 33)

To put it in other words, ideology can exist even when everyone cynically dismisses it as a useless nexus of illusory appearances. For instance, today it is nearly impossible to find a person who believes that money possesses some inherent value. We are all aware that, in itself, it is a rather useless piece of paper. Nonetheless, we all behave as if it was blessed with some treasured essence. This is precisely why, for Žižek (1989), behaviour is the essence of beliefs. One's behaviour stages the according belief in advance. One accepts an argument in support of a theory only once one already implicitly believes in it, that is, only once one already acts according to the theory. Consequently, the whole society can function perfectly well, even though nobody believes in its functioning directly. All we have to do is act as if a given social order existed and presuppose that others believe in that very illusion. In short, the activity of individuals generates the social symbolic order.

In conclusion, evolution of the narrative self appears to be deeply limited by emotions, which result from the embodied social practice. This is precisely why it sometimes appears so painful to oppose society, insofar as we conceptualise society in terms of patterns of behaviour shared by individuals. Namely, it is not only that one is faced with an impossible task of one person against the world; rather, we are faced with ourselves. In order to change society, we must first destroy ourselves – one must murder that intimate feeling of having a determinate place within reality. That is, in the end, a process of pain.

6.3 Consequences for freedom

On a closing note, I will end this discussion with a few remarks as to how freedom is to be conceptualised within the proposed framework. For those who bother to care about freedom of will or at least to deny the possibility of deterministic reality, there is good news and then there is less good news.

As far as material reality is concerned, ultimately, the universe is indeterministic. One can speak of local determinisms insofar as one isolates the local chain of positive being for a purpose of analysis. Positively, this is precisely what science is about. Nonetheless, if reality is considered in absolute terms, then subjectivities – primordial selves – break the causal order, thereby introducing radical contingency. One can imagine a causal network, where the output of each node is calculated by combining input with some predetermined value inherent to the respective node. In such analogy, subjectivity would represent a node with a lack of value. In other words, the input gets assigned a purely random value that is established in the very moment the input arrives, thereby generating a contingent output, which could not have been known beforehand. Indeterminacy is retroactively determined. It follows, even if there existed such a thing as Laplace's demon, it could not predict the future precisely.

In terms of our experience of free will, I am inclined to side with the neuroscientist, hence conceptualising it as an illusion. However, whereas the neuroscientist comes to such conclusion by reference to causal brain operations, I rather attribute the lack of freedom to the imprisonment in the symbolic. Namely, one makes a decision by employing ideas that are part of a greater social structure, which one does not control. In a way, the decision is made through the one making the decision. Or, in other words, the outcome of the decision was already implicitly present within the symbolic structure. By analogy, recall the notion of distributed knowledge as a totality of logical consequences of the sum of knowledge of all the individual group members (Ule, 2008). One can simply explicate such potential knowledge by using proper logical operations. Note, however, that knowledge itself was already implicitly present, one does not innovate it. Could not the same be said of decisions, namely, that the rules employed in a decision-making process are fixed within the structure?

Nonetheless, as we have stressed above, symbolic structures are fragile by nature: they are incomplete and eventful. Although we reason through these structures, the structures themselves are prone to change. Moreover, since we have conceptualised the symbolic structure as arising out of activity of people, then we have a certain capacity to influence the way we reason. To put it differently, the real decisions are those that change the discursive structure itself, in effect changing the very subjective position from which we reason – the narrative self. We might imagine this to occur when a radical change in activity of people is brought about, like a revolution; or, when an extreme emotional episode “resets” the embodied concepts, like a near death experience or drug-induced mystical “revelations”.

Bear in mind that these events cause the structure to dissolve. They represent the point of pure contingency. In some sense, one’s identity does not exist at that point. Moreover, there is no way of telling how the symbolic order will establish itself henceforth. In other words, there is no way of foreseeing what kind of new narrative self will arise; what will be the new form of reasoning. Most likely, as is often the case, the old patterns will re-establish themselves under the guise of novelty.

Thus, freedom in a form of indeterminacy is established retroactively (Žižek, 2006).³⁰ One can grasp it only once it has already occurred. This might be an idea worth considering by those who seek creative innovations. Namely, one ought to envisage an environment where patterns of thinking are prone to break down and blindly walk in with a hope to return with a new narrative self.

To conclude, we are not determined, just as we are not free. Contingency lies at the heart of matter and our souls. One should never

³⁰ Granted, one is always justified in objecting that indeterminacy does not represent freedom. Instead, one might rather speak of randomness or chaos.

mistake this contingency for an epistemological deadlock. It does not represent the failure of observation or a lack of total and harmonious knowledge. Instead, it makes the two possible in the first place. Contingency is an ontological principle and the source of subjective life.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

“In his capacity as ‘symbolic animal’, man transcends confines of finitude and temporality.”

Slavoj Žižek

Finally, let us try to explicate what the self is. Up until now, we have been circling around the notion of the self, like a dynamical system gravitates around its attractor. Therefore, in the concluding chapter I will illustrate how the illusive sense of self emerges out of the underlying processes that we have been describing so far.

As I have emphasised throughout the previous chapters, the self is an active process. In fact, it designates the dialectical relationship between the primordial self and the narrative self – the symbolic structure. In other words, the sense of self emerges only through social interactions. Granted, that is to say that the primordial self is not enough to account for our typical sense of self – that illusory sense of permanent identity. After all, according to the brain stem hypothesis it is very likely that lizards possess an experiential standpoint, yet those, who would attribute them any sense of individuation – an experiential unity that they experience as the self –, are rare, if there are any. Thus, the sense of self is social at its core.

The dialectical relationship is best discernible in the interplay between the “I” and the “me”, as designated by Mead (1934). Recall that, for Mead, the mind can fully develop only through socialisation. One can meaningfully interact with others only when one internalises the generalised attitude of others, thereby objectifying oneself in the emergent “me”. One can perform a particular role, say, of a basketball player, only when one knows the roles or perspectives of the other players and the rules of the game. This social anticipation is precisely what provokes the emergence of the “me”. One simulates social interaction in advance and, according to Mead, this simulation is exactly what constitutes self-consciousness.

Now, when such reflection is constituted, the very watching through the gaze of another forms the “me”. Indeed, this entails that one possesses as many social selves as there are groups in which one participates.³¹ There is the student self and then there is the family self. However, there is always the basic social self, that is, the “me” that exists in relation to society as a whole. This general “me” persists as a relatively stable unity throughout longer periods of time.

For Mead, the self as a unity can exist in consciousness only as an object. Thus, one can never be directly aware of oneself – one has to pay the price of alienation. In other words, the “I” is present implicitly and can come into being only through the “me” in a retroactive manner:

“The ‘I’ of this moment is present in the ‘me’ of the next moment. There again I cannot turn around quick enough to catch myself. I become a ‘me’ insofar as I remember what I said.”

(Mead, 1934, p. 174)

³¹ According to Mead’s usage of terminology, the “me” designates the social self.

The passage not only shows how the “I” makes itself discernible through the ensuing “me”, but also indicates their dialectical relationship. That is, the social situation one finds oneself in constitutes the “me” and with it the social expectations along with the possible behavioural trajectories. However, the actual action one undertakes is governed by the “I” – there is always some minimal contingency at work. Recall that neither the mind, neither the body works in a fully deterministic fashion. Hence, although the “me” prescribes a repertoire of possible behaviours, the execution thereof can be novel or different from what has been seen hitherto, to say the least – this is the free and contingent “I”. In effect, as the “I” provokes a novel behaviour, the social situation is redefined, thereby changing the very structure that brought the “me” into being. A basketball player performs a novel move, thus inscribing it in the social sphere – creating a new behavioural trajectory in the game, new generalised attitudes of others. Other players can expect different behaviour from the player than they did prior to the act. Consequently, the “me” changes and as such delimits new behavioural trajectories, which the “I” can creatively put into practice. In this way, the “I” and the “me” constantly interact with each other, dialectically delimiting each other’s being. The reflexive process thus entails that one objectifies oneself anew from moment to moment. One’s self is therefore never the same. However, the process that brought it into being is.

Indeed, there runs a straight parallel between Mead’s depiction of the self and the framework proposed in this work. Namely, we have seen that only discourse can create the reflective distance that enables one to objectify oneself. There is no proper self beforehand. Before the social dimension imposes itself, one is the world one perceives. However, as Žižek (2008) puts it, the subject is never directly included in the symbolic order. It is implicitly present as a disturbing lack, bringing about instability in the totalising chain of symbols. Only empty signifiers can stand for the primordial self.

Thus, the symbolic order equips one with meaning, rationality and the ability to grasp oneself and the surroundings. Crucially, it delimits one's potential actions. As the symbolic structure itself is incomplete, it is also unpredictable. In effect, every action has a performative potential to enact a different symbolic order. As in Mead's dialectic, here every novel action gives rise to a new symbolic order as well. Consequently, one grasps oneself and the world in a slightly different way.

To summarise, first one becomes aware of oneself through discourse – one objectifies oneself in a symbol. Then one acts through discourse in a contingent fashion. In effect, the action designates an event of a new discursive formation – a new way of grasping one's own being. The circle repeats itself *ad infinitum*, rendering one's sense of self ever changing, yet always being a product of the same process.

In conclusion, it ought to be noted that the variety of approaches to the problem of the self have not been exhausted here. In terms of systems theory, this work designates a reduction of complexity, where a selected reduction necessarily entails other selections being left out. Or, in other words, one could always approach the problem from a different perspective.

Although I have provided a brief overview of the conceptualisations of the self, a special treatment has been given to the social aspects thereof. The underlying reasons for this choice reflect an opinion that the supremacy of neuroscience within cognitive sciences ought to be supplemented with a fair share of social symbolic dimensions, especially when pondering over a phenomenon such as the sense of self. The necessity of an interdisciplinary approach is in particular rendered evident in ontological speculations.

Admittedly, the framework I have endeavoured to establish in this work is far from completed or without any flaws. Instead, one should read it as a way of thinking when approaching the problem of the self.

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Appendix

Abstract

Self, Brain and Society represents an interdisciplinary account of structures underlying the sense of self – that illusive feeling of being one and the same person over a longer period of time – with a focus on social processes. An overview of the prevalent conceptualisations of the self is provided, along with the notions of social realities and practices that regulate the meaning-making mechanisms through which the self emerges. This thesis argues for a model of incomplete reality, whereby the body-mapping brain areas, such as the upper nuclei of brain stem, generate a radical negation through which the experiential dimension emerges – the primordial self. The process is then repeated within phenomenal consciousness – the social symbolic order introduces the reflective distance, which enables one to objectify oneself within a symbol. This marks the birth of the narrative self. The link between society and the subjective symbolic order is identified in emotions. That is, feelings, generated by the socially regulated behaviour of the body, secure the stability of the contingent narrative self. In conclusion the self is depicted as a dialectical relationship between the primordial self and the narrative self, whereby the primordial self performatively enacts the social structures through which the narrative self emerges, yet it is the narrative self that delimits the possible behavioural trajectories of the primordial self.

Kurzfassung

Die vorliegende Ausarbeitung *Selbst, Hirn und Gesellschaft* liefert eine interdisziplinäre Betrachtung des Selbsterlebens, also der Illusion über eine längere Zeit ein und dieselbe Person zu sein und legt dabei den Fokus auf soziale Prozesse. Neben einem Überblick über bestehende Konzepte des Selbsts werden soziale Wirklichkeiten und Verhaltensweisen aufgezeigt, die die Mechanismen der Bedeutungsgebung regulieren und durch welche sich das Selbst herausbildet. Im Anschluss wird ein Modell von unvollständigen Realitäten vorgestellt, wobei die Hirnregionen, die den Körper kartographieren, wie z.B. der obere Kern des Hirnstamms, eine radikale Verneinung generieren und sich so die Erfahrungsdimension, in Form des primordialen Selbsts, herausbildet. Dieser Prozess wird anschließend innerhalb des Bewusstseins wiederholt: Die sozial symbolische Ordnung führt eine reflektierende Distanz ein, welche es ermöglicht, sich selbst mit einem Sinnbild zu identifizieren. Das stellt die Geburt des narrativen Selbsts dar. Es wird aufgezeigt, dass die Verbindung zwischen der Gesellschaft und der subjektiv symbolischen Ordnung in Emotionen liegt und damit, dass die Stabilität des narrativen Selbsts über Gefühle, die vom sozial regulierten Verhalten des Körpers produziert werden, abgesichert wird. Abschließend wird das Selbst als dialektische Beziehung zwischen dem primordialen und dem narrativen Selbst dargestellt, wobei das primordiale Selbst die sozialen Strukturen performativ entwickelt, durch welche sich das narrative Selbst herausbildet und die möglichen Verhaltensformen des primordialen Selbst eingrenzt.

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